

LION



SHE LURED MEN—MET MURDER

my FLESH is SWEET

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DAY
KEENE



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Downey

HIS HANDS REACHED OUT . . .

AND FOUND HER RICH, SWEET FLESH

Blinded with blood, stunned by the suddenness and fury of the attack, Connors reached out with numbed fingers, groping through the red film to find his assailant.

And his fingers found flesh, bare flesh, soft flesh, flesh for a man to dream on.

This woman he held was the murderer, Connors knew, and he felt a moment's sadness. For even though his very life was at stake, Connors did not want to know that this woman had killed—once, twice, three times. She was a woman for a man to love, he thought, and then the red film washed through his head, and he knew no more . . .

MY FLESH IS SWEET follows in the great LION tradition of *The Lustful Ape* and *Joy Street*. Start reading it here—you'll not put it down until you've been swept through every fast, thrilling page.

A LION BOOK

NOT A REPRINT

MY FLESH IS SWEET

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL
BY DAY KEENE

LION



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A LION BOOK

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and the author's agent, Scott Meredith.

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CHAPTER ONE

Heat lay a prickly, flower-studded, blanket on Mexico City. In an hour or so it would rain. At this season of the year it always did. After the rain the city would come to life again. Now, in the hour before *siesta*, pedestrian traffic was thinning. The cries of the beggars lining the Avenida Juarez had grown less shrill. Small merchants yawned in their doorways, eager to roll down their shutters. Sleeping Indians were already sprawled on the grass or nodding on the tree-shaded benches dotting the Alameda.

Hurrying across the east end of the Alameda to the post office to pick up a check for sixty-five thousand dollars in payment for the seven part serial he'd written for the Saturday Evening Post or, failing that, still be able to reach the National Pawn Shop before it closed, Ad Connors thought—

This is it. One way or another, I'm getting out of here. Today.

A big man, in his early thirties, his last clean white suit was sodden with perspiration. The *frijoles* he'd eaten for lunch lay heavy on his stomach. He had a sudden and a fierce nostalgia for the sight and smell of Broadway and a kosher corned-beef on rye. If he ever got back to New York he'd never again go farther south than 42nd Street. By hocking both his typewriter and his watch he should be able to raise the fare.

He was rounding the Palace of Fine Arts when he heard the crash. By the time he reached the corner the usual post-office-corner-crowd of petty thieves, sidewalk merchants, and male and female lottery ticket vendors, were gathered around two cars in the intersection of Tacuba and Teatro

Nacional. One of the cars was a '50 gray Ford coupe with Illinois license plates. The other was a soldier-chauffeured army Cadillac.

In the back seat of the dented Cadillac a fat-faced, one star *generale*, the neck of his uniformed shirt unbuttoned, sat picking his lunch from his teeth as he admired the anatomical topography of the little brunette *turista* climbing out of the Ford coupe.

Connors didn't blame him for looking. She was a little honey. She was a breath from home wearing Indian straw sandals on bare feet, white slacks so sheer the rolled hem of her scanties showed, and a V-necked bolero to match that left her tanned mid-riff bare. More, she was so mad she was willing to dig up Santa Anna's bones and start the Mexican War all over.

Connors pushed his way up closer so he could hear what she was saying.

Eleana forced herself to be calm. After all accidents did happen. It wouldn't do a bit of good to follow her first inclination to kick the chauffeur in the shins. Both of the policemen shouting at her in Spanish wore small American flags on their sleeves. According to the automobile club guide book that meant they spoke English.

She gave them her best school teacher look. "Stop that shouting right now. And if you want me to listen to you, speak English. It wasn't my fault. I had the right of way."

The policemen stopped shouting but neither of them spoke. Despite the *Estados Unidos* flags on their sleeves, both had lost their English. They wanted no part of the *generale*. All they wanted was to get the little *turista* and her car out of the intersection.

The chauffeur got into the argument. The light might have just changed, true. But he had blown his horn and *Generale* Estaban was in a hurry. If the *senorita* hadn't been driving faster than the law permitted she could have stopped. He shrugged his contempt. Besides, from the man-

ner of her dress, she was obviously nothing but a *Norte Americano* baggage.

It wasn't any of Connors' business but it burned him to hear the chauffeur stamp the girl as something he doubted she was. Pushing the man in front of him aside, he stepped into the small opening around the two cars. "Now, just a minute, soldier. Let's watch our language."

Eleana clutched his arm. "You're an American?"

"I am."

"And you speak Spanish?"

"I do."

The fingers on Connors' arm tightened. "Then tell the police it wasn't my fault and I demand they arrest the officer who owns the car unless he agrees to pay for the damage he's done."

Connors attempted to disillusion her. "Honey, you're in Mexico and the guy is a general."

She insisted. "Please."

Connors set his portable typewriter case on the street and repeated what she'd said in Spanish.

The policemen looked at the *generale*. Taking the toothpick from his mouth he leaned both arms on the window sill and patted Eleana with his eyes. Then he turned on his Spanish charm. The fault was entirely that of his stupid chauffeur. He would be pleased to have her automobile made as good as new. More, if the beautiful young lady would be so kind as to give his chauffeur the name of her hotel he, *Generale Estaban*, would be happy to escort her to her room where they could discuss the matter further over a few drinks of something cool.

The onlookers laughed knowingly.

Eleana wanted to know what he'd said.

The back of his neck red, Connors gave her part of it. "He admits it was his chauffeur's fault and he's willing to pay the repair bill on your car."

A wide smile on his fat face, *Generale Estaban* opened

the door of the Cadillac. The palms of his hands sweating, Connors stuck his neck all the way out by closing the door. It could be he was wrong. It could be the little brunette would enjoy being tumbled by a Mexican *generale*. But he was damned if he would be a party to it.

"The *senorita*," he told Estaban, "thanks you from the bottom of her heart. But as she has no one to whom she may entrust her car she must refuse your gracious offer to escort her to her hotel."

The army man gave him a sour look. Eleana said, "Be sure to get his name and where to send the bill. And tell him my name is Eleana Hayes and I'm stopping at the Flamingo."

One of the policemen wrote the name and address on the back of a charge slip and handed it to *Generale* Estaban. He stuffed it in his shirt pocket and ordered his chauffeur to drive on.

Connors inspected the Ford. Outside of a broken bumper and a crumpled fender it seemingly was undamaged. He wrenched off the broken bumper and put it in the turtle back. "You're all right now?" he asked the girl. "You can drive?"

Eleana smiled, "Of course." She slid in behind the wheel and killed the motor three times just trying to put the car into gear.

Connors looked at her lips. They were quivering. Reaction was setting in. With traffic as thick as it was, he doubted she could drive a block without getting into another jam. He told her to slide over, reached for his typewriter and found that it was gone. Sighing, he slipped into the seat Eleana had vacated.

Eleana was concerned. "Weren't you carrying something?"

"Yes," Connors said. "I was. A ride on the B.M.T. and a kosher corned-beef on rye."

The crowd cheered as they drove away. Eleana was puzzled. "What are they cheering about?"

Connors told her. "Love."

There was a parking space in the chained-off area in front of the Palace of Fine Arts. Connors parked in it. "Now look, Miss—"

"Hayes," Eleana smiled. "Eleana Hayes."

Her smile was as nice as the rest of her. Connors introduced himself. "My name is Ad Connors." He waited a moment hoping she might recognize it. When she didn't, he continued, "I'm an American citizen, reasonably respectable. And you're still pretty shaky. So if you don't mind waiting while I pick up my mail, I'll be glad to drive you wherever you want to go."

Eleana's smile brightened. "You're very kind, Mr. Connors. And if you don't mind, I'll take you up on that. I did have the green light. Believe me. But after driving those mountains between Laredo and here—"

"Yeah. I know what you mean," Connors said.

He climbed the steps of the post office whistling. There were three letters for him but none of them meant a thing.

On the bottom of the rejection slip from the Post his agent had scribbled a few kind words. Shad still thought the novel was the best piece of work he'd done so he was sending it on to a book publisher. He mustn't feel discouraged. The thing for him to do was sit right down and write another book. He was as good as the best. Sooner or later he couldn't help but break into the big money.

Fingering the three pesos in his pocket, Connors was pleased to hear it. The other two letters were from lads still running pulp mills. Business was bad with them, too.

He dropped the letters in a trash can and walked back to the Ford. Eleana was applying lipstick. "I wonder, Mr. Connors, if—"

"If what?" Connors asked.

"If having imposed on you this much I could impose on you still further." Digging into her braided straw purse Eleana handed him a letter. "I wonder if you would help

me find this address? It's really much more important than having my car repaired."

Connors glanced at the address. It was on Tacuba, less than a block away. "Why not?"

He locked the car and helped her across the street, hoping the fact she was being escorted by a fairly husky male *Norte Americano* would spare the seat of her well-filled slacks from too many lemon-colored fingers with a habit of nipping what they admired.

The address on Tacuba wasn't good. It wasn't bad. Attorney Caesar A. Santchez's office was on the second floor rear. A plump Mexican girl who looked like she had been crying was typing at a flat-topped desk in back of a varnished railing. She got up and came to the rail as Connors opened the door for Eleana.

"Si, señor?"

Eleana said, "Tell her I'm Miss Hayes and Attorney Santchez is expecting me."

Connors repeated what she'd said in Spanish but the name didn't mean a thing to the secretary. She was sorry but Attorney Santchez wasn't in his office. In fact he wasn't in Mexico City. At four o'clock that morning, Attorney Santchez had received a phone call from an old *amigo* in Uruapan and had departed almost immediately to effect a reunion. His secretary didn't know when he would return. Neither did she bother to explain what she had been doing in her employer's apartment at four o'clock in the morning.

Connors translated what she said. "Attorney Santchez is out of town. He left for Uruapan this morning."

"Uruapan?"

"Yeah. It's over on the west coast. Well, not exactly on the coast. It's near Paricutin. You know. The volcano that pushed up out of a corn field back in 1943."

Connors thought Eleana was going to cry. Instead her lips compressed and green drowned the gray in her eyes.

"But that's impossible. I wired him I was on my way. He can't be out of town. I *have* to see him."

Connors repeated what she'd said in Spanish.

The secretary shrugged. Connors doubted she approved of Miss Hayes. He knew she didn't approve of the outfit Eleana was wearing.

"Ask her," Eleana said, "if she knows the address of Mr. Donald Hayes."

The girl had never heard, or claimed she'd never heard of anyone by that name. Connors told Eleana so and Eleana pounded her fist on the railing. "She's lying. She has to be lying." She screamed at the secretary. "You give me my father's address."

The secretary screamed back at her. Then, recovering her dignity, she assured Connors *he* was a gentleman. *He* had removed his hat when he entered the office. *He* had spoken softly and in a considerate tone of voice. *He* hadn't doubted her words. It desolated her to have to ask *him* to leave. But unless he did so, immediately, and took his *Norte Americano* baggage with him she would be forced to call the police.

Connors asked her if Santchez was really in Uruapan. The girl said he was and Connors believed her. Lighting a cigarette, he told Eleana, "I don't know what this is about. It isn't any of my business. But Attorney Santchez' secretary is plenty sore about something. And she says unless we leave she's going to call the police. Do you want them in on this?"

Eleana shook her head. "No. This is a private affair."

Down on Tacuba again, Connors guided Eleana into a small restaurant and blew two of his last three *pesos* on coffee and pastries. The little brunette protested she wasn't hungry but she ate three pastries and allowed the waitress to refill her cup. Connors let her mention the affair in the attorney's office. Eleana began by asking how far it was from Mexico City to Uruapan.

Connors said he thought it was around two hundred and fifty miles.

"Over what kind of roads?"

"Good. That is, good for mountain roads."

Eleana accepted a cigarette. "Damn and double damn."

Connors offered her a light. "I take it you don't like to drive mountain roads."

"It gives me goose pimples to even think of it."

"Still you *have* to see this Attorney Santchez?"

"Either Attorney Santchez or my father. This isn't a pleasure trip. It's business. It could mean a lot of money to me."

Connors did some mental arithmetic. The rent on his apartment was paid for another two weeks. But a man couldn't eat an apartment. Now, with his typewriter stolen, he couldn't raise train or bus fare back to New York. On the other hand if he could get as far as Laredo he could pick up a newspaper job for a month or two to tide him over until he could bat out a few pulp yarns. So he couldn't write serious novels. He could still write whodunits.

"Why?" Eleana asked. "I mean why are you so interested?"

"I was just wondering," Connors said, "if we couldn't be of mutual benefit to each other. How long do you intend to stay in Mexico?"

Eleana sucked hard at her cigarette. "Not a minute longer than I have to. In fact I'd hoped to start back tomorrow morning."

"That," Connors said, "would suit me fine." He laid his last *peso* on the table. "Look. That's my bankroll. One *peso*. You want to go to Uruapan to see this Santchez. But mountain driving terrifies you. I want to get back to the States. I was on my way to hock my typewriter to raise the price of a ticket when you smacked into *Generale Estaban*. While I was giving you a hand someone swiped my machine and now I'm stuck. So I'll make you a proposition."

Eleana's eyes narrowed slightly. "What sort of proposition?"

"I'll drive you to Uruapan to see this Santchez and then on up to Laredo for the ride and my expenses."

The waitress assumed the *peso* was her tip. "*Gracias, señor.*"

Eleana asked Connors if he was serious.

"I was never more serious."

She protested. "But I don't even know you."

Connors pointed out few employers knew their employees before they engaged them. He gave her a thumbnail sketch of himself. "I'm a fairly well known former pulp writer who thought he could write a serious novel. I came down here to write it because I thought I could live cheaper. Now the novel has flopped and I'm broke. But I can give you good references, including a sub-secretary over at the American Consulate. What do you say?"

He watched the little brunette wet her lips with the tip of her tongue and knew what she was thinking. People just didn't do such things. Still, she was afraid of mountain driving. He had been kind to her. He seemed respectable. A new, deeper, shade of green crept into her eyes as she asked, finally, "It would be strictly business?"

Connors raised his right palm shoulder high. "Strictly business." He hoped, suddenly, that he was lying.

Eleana smoked a long moment in silence. Then she temporized, "Well, I *have* to see Attorney Santchez and I've had all the mountain driving I can take. Let's talk to this man you say you know over at the Consulate."

The sub-secretary's name was Demming. He gave Connors a big send-off. Ad Connors, Demming swore, was both a gentleman and the best damn detective story writer in the entire United States. More to the point he showed Miss Hayes a tall stack of pulp magazines with Connors' name on their covers.

Connors grinned at Eleana. "Which ought to prove while I may be broke, I'm not exactly a bum."

Back in the car again, she asked, "But if you're such a successful writer, how is it that you haven't any money?"

Ad explained, "That's the hell of it. I'm not successful. I'm merely one of perhaps two dozen hacks in the pulp detective field on whom the editors can depend to stuff the seven basic plots with suspense and give them fresh reader appeal."

Eleana accepted another cigarette. "And just what are the seven basic plots?"

Grinning, Ad admitted, "I'll be damned if I know. But I read in a book once that there are seven of them."

CHAPTER TWO

The Ford Agency was closed but Connors found a garage not far from his apartment that agreed to go to work on the car immediately. He elected to stay with the car while the work was being done. Miss Hayes thought it a good idea. She cashed two fifty dollar travelers' checks and gave him enough for the bill plus thirty *pesos* for expenses. Connors felt like a fool but he took it. The understanding was he was to call for her at six o'clock the next morning ready to take off for Uruapan.

Then, hoping she might call and suggest they spend the evening together, Connors gave Eleana the phone number of his apartment.

The Mexican mechanic watched her into a cab and drew out the word in absolute approval. "N-ice."

Connors had to put his hands in his pockets to keep from hitting him. He had no right to be jealous. So far he was just a hired hand. Except for a few minutes in the restaurant when the air had grown decidedly sticky he had no reason to even hope it might be otherwise. But a lot could happen in a thousand miles, especially in Mexico.

It was after six when the fender was dry. The body man

had done a good job. Unless one looked close, and that under a bright light, the fender looked as good as new. He paid the bill, got a receipt, and drove the car up the street and into the woven-wire protected parking area beside his apartment building.

By seven his grips were packed and he'd locked them in the car. Then he sat down and waited for the phone to ring. When it hadn't rung by ten o'clock he knew that Eleana wasn't going to call and walked down to Louie's to eat and buy a bottle of rum.

It was two o'clock when Eleana called. Ad sat up mouthful cotton that the rum had seeded. "Ad Connors speaking," he said into the phone.

Eleana sounded worried, also a little high. "Come right over to the hotel, please," she begged him. "As fast as you can make it."

Connors spat out a mouthful of cotton. "I'll be right over," he told her.

After returning from Louie's he'd lain down on the couch without bothering to undress. All he had to do was lace his shoes and put on his hat and topcoat. He got as far as the hall then went back for the remaining half litro of rum. A man never knew when a little rum might come in handy.

The Flamingo was on Insurgentes not far from the Paseo De La Reforma. Connors parked the Ford at the curb and went in. The hotel night clerk brushed him with his eyes then returned them to the paper he was reading.

Two-A was in the front of the building at the end of a long hall. Connors could hear the *generale's* voice while he was still twenty feet from the door. Eleana had been smart enough to leave it cracked. Connors pushed it open and walked in. It was a two room suite, bed and sitting room. Her back to him, Eleana was standing in the doorway of the bedroom superimposing in English her opinion of the *generale* on his hiccup punctuated flow of gutter Spanish. She was wearing a pastel green backless evening gown and from

the angle at which her elbows were jutting Connors had the distinct impression she was cupping her breasts in her hands. When she heard him, she turned. What there was left of the front of her dress was in tatters. He'd been right about her being high.

"Get him out of my room, please, Ad," she begged.

Connors looked into the bedroom. *Generale* Estaban was making himself at home. He'd already removed his dress tunic and his shirt and was sitting on the edge of the bed busily tugging at one of his boots.

"Get him out of here," Eleana wailed.

Connors asked her if she had ever tried to throw a Mexican general out of a lady's boudoir deep in the heart of Mexico City at two o'clock in the morning.

"Please, Ad," she begged. "I didn't know what I was getting into. I was about to call you and suggest we have supper together when General Estaban phoned and—"

"Yeah. Sure. I know," Connors said. "He wanted to discuss the damage to your car."

The army man continued to tug at his boot, too pleased with his graphic recital of past performances to realize his two-some had become a crowd.

Eleana began to cry. "I can't leave the room like this. And every time I try to get some clothes, he grabs me."

Connors asked why she hadn't phoned the desk instead of him.

Eleana said, "I was afraid they'd send for the police and I can't afford any scandal."

Connors walked on into the bedroom and sat on the bed beside Estaban. The *generale* wasn't pleased to see him. He opened his mouth to say so. Before he could, Connors took the bottle of rum from his pocket, swigged a quick drink from the neck, and handed Estaban the bottle. "*Saludos.*"

Theoretically, the *generale's* hands were tied. A gentleman had to respond to a toast. He also wanted a drink. He took a big one. "*Saludos.*"

Still not entirely convinced that Connors was friendly to his cause, the army man washed the first drink down with a second. Then looking from Connors to Eleana, his eyes lighted in comprehension. Of course. Not all the best things in life were free. The reason the little *turista* had played coy was to give her bully time to arrive and discuss terms. Estaban was a sport about it. Fishing a fat wallet from his hip pocket he spilled a heap of ten- and twenty-*peso* notes on the bed. Then leaning forward he breathed rum in Connors' face. "*Quanto?*"

Connors wished he knew how much English the army man understood. He took a chance and asked Eleana if she had another bottle in the suite.

"No," she sniveled. "I haven't. She took advantage of the diversion to slip into a house coat and for a moment her breasts were exposed. They were nice breasts.

It didn't, Connors decided, matter greatly about the bottle. It hadn't been much of an idea. He doubted if he could pass Estaban out. His kind didn't pass out. They just got uglier and he was on the verge of being ugly now.

"How much?" Estaban repeated in English.

Connors stalled for time. "Well, the damage to the car came to two hundred and forty-five *pesos*." He laid the receipted bill on the bed.

Estaban counted two hundred and forty-five *pesos* on top of it. Then, after a moment of drunken consideration, he added five twenty-*peso* notes to the pile. "Okay." He kicked off his boot and fumbled with his belt. "You go now."

Eleana gasped, "Don't you dare leave me alone with him."

"I don't intend to," Connors said.

He wished he knew what to do. This far south of the border the military, especially in General Estaban's brackets, ranked one star short of God. Taking a deep breath he separated the five twenty-*peso* notes from the rest of the money and tucked them back into Estaban's still bulging wallet. Then, as diplomatically as he could, he broke the bad news.

He was sad the young lady's manner of dress and willingness to accept a supper invitation from a total stranger, even a military man as distinguished as himself, had led him to false conclusions. But they were false. Despite appearances to the contrary the foolish little *señorita* didn't commercialize her affections.

It was a good sales talk. But Estaban wasn't having any. Getting up from the bed he wove a few feet toward Eleana. Thinking he meant to grab her Connors stood up and balled his fists. But the army man had forgotten Eleana for the moment. He was after the holstered revolver he'd laid on the dresser.

Pointing it at Connors, he said, "Get out. Get out or I'll shoot."

He was drunk enough to shoot. Connors shrugged and turned as if to leave the room. In getting the house coat Eleana had trapped herself near the closet. Sobbing she tried to follow Connors and Estaban threw out his gun hand to block her. As he did Connors turned back and brought up his balled right hand.

It was like hitting a stone wall. All Estaban did was grunt. Then, furious, using the gun barrel as a club, the general lashed out at Connors and Connors caught at his gun hand and wrestled him down on the bed. The shot was muffled between their bodies. The fat man went, suddenly, limp. Connors got to his feet drenched with sweat. Blood was staining Estaban's white undershirt. He lay on his back with his mouth open. As far as Connors could tell, he was dead.

"Good," Eleana panted.

"No. Not so good," Connors corrected her. The surface was thinner down here and easily scratched. Down here they still stood you against a wall and shot you for a lot less than shooting a *generale*.

Fighting down a desire to be sick he tiptoed to the hall door and looked out. No one seemed to have heard the shot.

Turning back he asked Eleana, "Did you tell him you were going to Uruapan?"

Eleana shook her head. "No." She was completely sober now.

"Then pack your things," Connors said. "Neither of us can afford to be here when they find him."

It took Eleana less than five minutes. She'd packed the same as he had, earlier in the evening.

A film of cold sweat on his palms, Connors locked the door behind them. It might be minutes. It might be an hour. It might be morning before the body was found.

As Eleana paid her bill, Connors winked at the clerk. "The *generale* is tired and requests he not be disturbed until morning. *Comprendo?*"

The clerk patted Eleana with his eyes. "*Si, señor.*"

Connors carried Eleana's bags outside and put them in the car. Then he asked the driver of one of the taxis parked near the hotel where he could pick up the Laredo road.

"You're on it, chum," the taxi-man told him. "Only you're headed the wrong way."

The *generale's* car with the chauffeur asleep at the wheel was parked in front of the taxis. Hoping the driver wouldn't wake up, Connors swung the Ford in a wide U turn and pointed it north on Insurgentes.

According to the road maps he'd studied in the garage, the Paseo De La Reforma led into the road to Morelia where he could pick up the road to Uruapan. Not that he intended to stop. Not now. Now it was a race for the border. But when road blocks were erected the chances were they would be on the main highway to Laredo.

Passing Chapultepec Castle, Eleana spoke for the first time since leaving the hotel. "Thank you. I don't know what I'd have done if I hadn't met you, Ad."

Connors laughed harshly. He'd killed a man for her, and she thanked him. Now the immediate danger was over, re-

action was setting in. He was so cold that his teeth chattered. He asked if there was a heater in the car. Eleana said there was and turned it on.

"What gave him the impression I was a tramp, Ad?"

Connors told her. "You."

Another girl might have kicked it around. Eleana left it there. She was twenty-one and attractive. She'd had the same trouble before. But not in Mexico. North of the border the combined letters n and o meant nothing doing. But there was a policeman on every corner to back up Funk and Wagnalls.

The heater helped a lot. The night air was cold but it was warm inside the car. Connors drove in silence until they were well into the mountains. Then he asked Eleana what she did in Chicago. She said she was an elementary school teacher and Connors realized for the first time she had a faint suspicion of a drawl.

"But you weren't born in Chicago."

"No," Eleana admitted. "I was born in Blue Mound, Missouri."

Connors lighted cigarettes for both of them. "Now suppose you tell me what this is all about. I've stuck my neck way out for you. And I'd like to know where I stand. What's this Attorney Santchez business? Why do you have to see him?"

She said, "I'm trying to locate my father. He has something I want."

"Your father is this Donald Hayes you mentioned?"

Eleana's drawl was even more apparent. "That's right."

Connors drove glancing from time to time in the rear vision mirror. "And what is it he has you want?"

"My mother's marriage license."

"Your what?"

"My mother's marriage license." Eleana's cigarette tip described a fiery arc. "It's such a mixed up affair I don't know where to begin. But I'm engaged to be married this Fall.

And I want proof he and mother *were* married." The lights of a car traveling in the other direction gilded her face briefly. Her voice was wry. "In other words, certified proof I'm out of Celeste by Donald in the manner as prescribed by law so if I should bear an heir apparent there will be no possible stain on his or the Lautenbach escutcheon."

Connors asked, incredulous, "You mean you're marrying old man Lautenbach the multi-millionaire meat packer?"

Eleana laughed. "Don't be silly. Of course not. I'm marrying his son, Allan."

"Oh," Connors said. "I see." He drove, trying to recall what little he knew about the heir to the Lautenbach money. A man of forty-odd the younger Lautenbach went in for polo ponies and jumpers and show girls given to breach of promise suits. Somehow he couldn't imagine Eleana married to him. "You love the guy?" he asked.

"Love," Eleana said, "has nothing to do with it. If I don't love Allan, so what? I don't intend to teach school all my life. This is probably the only chance I'll ever have to break into the big money." She sucked the tip of her cigarette to a red glow then exhaled slowly. "Besides, I don't think Allan cares very much whether I love him or not. What he and his father really want is a young, respectable, healthy broodmare to tone up the family blood line."

Connors laughed. "And they insist in this proof of your legitimacy?"

"No," Eleana drawled. "At least they haven't so far. But considering the amount of money involved and the purpose of the marriage, I imagine some lawyer will mention the subject before the wedding bells ring out and I don't want to be caught unprepared. That's why I drove down to see Attorney Santchez and ask him to arrange a meeting with my father."

Connors didn't get it. "A meeting with him?"

Eleana explained. "Yes. You see my father and mother separated when I was four. That is he separated by running

off with a Mexican girl who did a high wire act in the circus that my father and his brother owned."

Still puzzled, Connors asked, "But where does this Santchez come in? Why does he have to arrange the meeting?"

Eleana told him. "Because I don't know father's address. And Attorney Santchez does. He's been father's attorney for years. You see, since shortly after he left her, through Attorney Santchez, father has mailed my mother fifty dollars a month for my care. That is he did up until three years ago when I began to teach."

It sounded confused to Connors and he had enough to worry him. "You wouldn't by any chance be kidding me?"

Eleana shook her head. "No, Ad. I mean it. Every word. I don't suppose you ever heard of the Hayes Brothers' Circus?"

"No. I can't say I have."

Eleana snuffed her cigarette in the ash tray. "From what mother tells me it was worth seeing. She was their star equestrienne."

"In other words, bareback rider."

"That's right. And they had three rings and four elephants and all sorts of acts and clowns and sideshows. The show wintered in Blue Mound where I was born. And father and Uncle John made lots of money. That is they did until the depression hit them. Then father had to go to some man in California and mortgage the show for fifty thousand dollars. I've read the letter he wrote mother saying he'd gotten the money and was starting back. And he did come back. A half dozen people in Blue Mound saw him. But the stinker didn't go near either mother or Uncle John. Instead he picked up this Mexican girl and skipped with her and the money."

Ad asked, "What happened to the circus?"

"The man who held the mortgage took it over. Mother didn't even know where father was for two years. Then I guess father's conscience hurt him and she began to get the monthly letters and checks from Attorney Santchez."

Connors glanced up at his rear vision mirror. "Your mother divorced your father, I suppose?"

"Years ago."

"And now you're down here to get her marriage license from your father?"

"That's right."

"Why didn't you write for it?"

"I did. A dozen times. And Attorney Santchez always replied that he would take up the matter with *Señor* Hayes. And that would be the last I'd hear of it."

"*Mañana*, eh?"

Despite the strain she was under the heat and the motion of the car was making Eleana sleepy. She curled sideways on the seat and rested her left cheek against the cushion.

"*Mañana*, my eye. It went on for months."

"Then why didn't you or your mother write to the city clerk of whatever town she was married in and get a duplicate?"

Eleana closed her eyes. "Because mother had only been over from France two months. And all she knows is that she and father were married in some little town in the midwest and they had to drive all night to get there."

"You wrote your father you were going to be married?"

"Um hmm."

"And he didn't ask for an invitation to the wedding?"

"Uh-uh. You see, the girl he ran away with had a husband."

"Even so. After all these years."

Eleana opened her eyes again. "You still don't understand, Ad. Father can't come back to the States. He killed his sweetheart's husband the night they ran away. That's why he does all his business through Santchez." She laid her hand on his arm. "I'm scared, Ad. Do you think General Estaban is dead?"

"I'm afraid so," Connors said grimly.

"And what will happen if they catch us?"

Connors gave it to her straight. "I don't know what they'll do to you. But they'll probably shoot me."

CHAPTER THREE

There were a number of good hotels and restaurants in Morelia catering to tourists. Connors passed them up in favor of a combination hotel-restaurant patronized chiefly by local trade. If the police hadn't fallen for the off-to-Laredo gag, it wouldn't be smart of them to show themselves in the places in which they might be expected.

While Eleana went to the washroom to freshen up, he gassed the car and had the oil and the tires and the battery checked. Then he ordered breakfast for both of them.

Eleana looked like a sale to *Colliers* when she sat across from him. She'd taken one of her suit cases into the washroom with her and changed into a two piece gray nylon suit with snakeskin purse and shoes to match and a sheer char-treuse blouse for contrast. She knew how to make up, and had.

Connors grinned at her. "You don't look much like a school teacher to me."

Eleana was cramped from sleeping in the car. The strain was beginning to tell on her. She wanted a cup of coffee. "And just what's wrong with being a school teacher?" She found her glasses in her purse and picked up the grease splattered menu.

"Nothing," Connors said. "And I've ordered for both of us."

Eleana returned her glasses to her purse. "Oh. And all this for just the ride and your expenses."

It was both what she said and the way she said it.

Connors pushed back his chair and stood up. "And to hell with you, too, Miss Hayes."

He walked out and got in the car and pointed it back

toward Morelia. He hoped she thought he was stealing it. Eleana told him later, she did. But when he got back to the filling station she was still sitting at the table mashing green sauce into her eggs as if she had a grudge against them.

Eleana spoke before he could. "I'm sorry. Please believe me, Ad. I didn't mean to be bitchy."

Still standing on his dignity, Connors showed her the fistful of *pesos* he'd gotten for his watch. It looked like a lot of money. It wasn't. There were only one hundred and thirty-two *pesos* in the roll and he'd had to sell the watch outright to get that much.

Eleana asked where he'd gotten the money.

He told her, stiffly, "I did what I was on my way to do when I met you. I sold my watch. From now on you pay your way and I'll pay mine."

Eleana's smile wasn't bitchy this time. It was cute. "Okay." She held out her hand palm up. "But if you don't mind then, Mister, will you give me the two hundred and forty-five *pesos* you euchred out of the *generale* so I can pay my check?"

Connors put his hand in his left coat pocket and brought it out filled with *pesos* he'd forgotten were there. It wasn't that funny but they both laughed until the little Indian waitress thought they both were crazy. After that they got along fine.

Back in the car, Connors wanted to head directly for Guadalajara but Eleana pointed out, not illogically, that if Estaban was dead and the police were searching for them the larger cities would undoubtedly be alerted before the small towns would and they would be as safe in Uruapan as they would be anywhere.

Connors agreed with her. "Uruapan it is then. Maybe I didn't kill the guy after all."

Eleana talked as he drove. As Connors got the picture, shortly after her father had deserted them, Eleana's mother had moved to Chicago and they had lived there ever since.

"Except for vacations," Eleana said. "Summers we go back to Blue Mound and live with Uncle John. He's been grand to us ever since father ran out. How well do you know Chicago, Ad?"

"Quite well," Connors admitted. "I spent five years in it."
"Writing detective stories?"

He grinned at her. "No. Dreaming up soap chip operas to fill in the deadly lull between commercials on how to wash one's panties in which soap and who won't smell any more if they listen to Gertie's Life Is Beautiful and remember to send in twenty-five cents and a box top for a bottle of genuine *Affair de Passion* as rubbed into the armpits by some of Hollywood's loveliest stars."

Eleana laughed. "Mother listens to those things all day long. I don't see how you could write them."

"There came a time when I couldn't."

"But it did pay well?"

Connors lighted cigarettes for both of them. "In the five years I was in it I averaged eight hundred dollars a week."

"And you quit that kind of a job?"

"Alas."

"And now you're broke?"

"No," Connors corrected her. "I have one hundred and thirty-two pesos. A good job. And prospects."

He glanced sideways at Eleana. There'd been a Slav in some bed in her family. Her cheeks under high bones were slightly hollow. Her lips were full and parted. From time to time she ran her hands over her breasts as if they were hurting her. She met his eyes and looked away.

"Hoot. Listen to the man."

Connors' pulse beat a little faster. He had Eleana classified now. She was neither naive nor a tramp. She was neither a prude nor a virgin. She did what she wanted to do with whom she wanted to favor but only in a manner and under circumstances that befitted the innate qualities of a lady. If *Generale Estaban* had been a gentleman about it,

the chances were that he would have gotten what he wanted.

Uruapan was just another town. There was the inevitable market place and plaza and a pretty public garden with a river flowing through it. There were the usual local police in the Square but none of them seemed in the least interested in either Connors or Eleana. Connors began to feel better. The chances were he'd only wounded Estaban and the army man was keeping his mouth shut to save face.

Attorney Santchez wasn't checked in at either of the big hotels but his secretary had been telling the truth. Connors found the attorney registered at the Morelas, a small hotel catering to the better class Mexican trade.

Connors drove the car into the fenced-in parking lot back of the hotel. Then, still thinking of Estaban, he registered himself and Eleana as *Señor Schmidt* and *Señorita Braun* of Vera Cruz and requested two rooms with a connecting bath.

Both of the rooms were huge with tall French windows opening on a flower-filled patio. For the sake of appearances Connors ordered the bellboy to take his bag into the far room. Then, when the boy had gone, he took Eleana into his arms and kissed her. Eleana wanted to be kissed. She kissed him fiercely in return. But she was practical.

"Please, Ad. Not now. I came here to talk to Attorney Santchez."

He said; "To hell with Attorney Santchez."

Eleana shook her head. "Maybe later, Ad. After I've talked to him."

She came into his arms again but the fire was gone. It was nice just holding her. Brushing his lips with hers, Eleana smiled, "You *are* nice. I like you." She pinched the lobe of his ear. "Now you get a few hours sleep."

"And after that?"

"We'll see."

Connors patted her and walked through the bathroom to his room. The boy had opened the windows but the room

was still hot and stuffy. He took off his coat and shirt. Then he stripped to his shorts and lay down on the bed thinking:

The damndest things happen to me.

He heard Eleana phone the desk clerk and asked to be connected with Attorney Santchez and assumed the lawyer was on the ground floor with them, not far away. At least a phone bell rang for a long time in one of the rooms across the patio. Then it stopped and Eleana said, "Two dirty words."

Connors asked her what was wrong.

She called, "Santchez doesn't answer his phone. And the clerk thinks he must have driven out to see *El Monstruo*. Would you like to see a volcano?"

"No thank you," Connors called back. "I've seen one."

The cool and quiet of the tree-shaded patio crowded into the room. The bed was soft. Connors felt a breeze ripple the hair on his chest. His sense of immediate need had dissipated. It was a long way to the border. He lighted a cigarette and lay listening to the muted sounds in Eleana's room.

For some reason, having nothing to do with General Estaban, he felt depleted and a little sad. Perhaps because at thirty-five he was still tom-cattling around, still not amounting to a damn any way a man looked at success. Other men his age had homes and families and a good job or a business. But somewhere along the line he'd missed the boat. He'd been lured on by a dream, spending life as if it was money.

There was a scuff of mules on the tile of the bathroom floor. Eleana closed and latched the door leading into his room. A moment later he heard running water and the intimate, homey, bathroom sounds of a woman preparing to—shop, attend a P.T.A. meeting, offer her fair white body as a Kinsey Report statistic. The thought amused rather than aroused Connors. The splashing in the tub went on for a long time. He closed his eyes for a moment. He had no intention of sleeping. He slept.

It was cool and much darker in the room when Connors

awakened. The splashing in the tub had stopped. The door was unlatched and open. He got up and looked in the bathroom. A dropped towel lay in a drying puddle on the floor. There was a lingering fragrance of bath powder. Eleana's bed had been slept in, or rested on, but she wasn't in her room.

Connors padded back into the bathroom scowling. Then he saw Eleana's note and caught on fire again. Scrawled in lipstick across his bare abdomen were the words, 'Alas. Poor Romeo. Will be back by five o'clock.' It was signed with a broken heart bleeding lipstick.

Connors' grin hurt his ears. "The devil. The cute little devil."

He started to dig a dressing gown out of his bag. Then, changing his mind, he dressed and left the hotel.

The flower market was less than two blocks away. He bought as many long stemmed gladioli as he could carry for six pesos. Then a litro of rum and a carton of cokes. The *rebozo* was in the window of a Japanese curio shop. Connors knew he was going to buy it as soon as he saw it in the window. Most *rebozos* are coarse and made of cotton. This was black silk appliqued with big white flowers. It looked like Eleana. The Japanese started at eighty-five pesos. Connors gave him the old tourist *esta mucha* and got him down to seventy-five. Then he let him have it in Spanish. The Japanese grinned and came down to sixty and he'd bought a shawl for his love.

Back at the hotel he sent an Indian maid for vases while he spread the silk shawl on the bed. Along with the flowers it brightened the room immeasurably. He had more trouble getting ice. As a compromise he put the cokes in the bathroom basin and let the cold water run.

He heard Eleana before he saw her. But she wasn't in her room or in the hall. She was in the patio and there was an imperative ring to her voice. "Ad."

Connors opened the French window wider.

It was almost dark in the patio now and the room light reached out to meet her. Eleana was still wearing the gray suit and chartreuse blouse. Her arms were filled with packages. She'd even bought a cheap sombrero. It dangled by its cord from her arm. As Ad took the packages from her, she said, worried, "I think he must be sick or something, Ad. I watched through the window a long time. And he didn't even move."

"Who didn't move?" Connors asked.

Eleana laid the sombrero on a chair. "Santchez. I got his room number from the clerk and looked in the window." She pointed across the patio. "And he's over there, lying on his bed but he won't answer his phone."

Connors walked with her across the patio. There was barely enough light left for him to see the figure of a man on the bed in the room she pointed out. "You're positive that's Attorney Santchez's room."

Eleana said, "I'm positive."

Connors stepped in through the French window. The man on the bed was tall and thin and not unhandsome. He was also Caesar A. Santchez. At least that was the name on the sheaf of letters spilling from the mouth of the brief case on the dresser. But he wasn't sick. He was dead. The handle of the knife that had killed him protruded three inches from his chest.

Eleana followed Ad into the room. "What's the matter with him, Ad?"

Ad told her the truth. "He's dead." He felt the flesh with the back of his fingers. The body was still warm. "And recently."

Eleana said, "Oh, my God."

Connors looked around the room. The bed was unmade and rumpled. A chair was lying on its back. A waste basket was overturned. But the chair and the basket were the only sign that the dead man might have fought for his life. His hair was neatly combed. His clothes were in order. Both

would seem to indicate he'd known and trusted the person who had stabbed him.

A gleam of metal caught Connors' eyes. He'd used the gag in murder yarns a dozen times but it seemed such things did happen. In falling back on the bed, Santchez had made a last grab and hung on to a piece of gold chain supporting an old fashioned heart-shaped watch charm. Connors struck a match and could read the initial D engraved on one side of the bulge.

Then, before he could stop her, Eleana reached over his shoulder and pried at the locket with her thumb nail. It popped open, exposing the picture of a smiling young woman. Eleana's hand shook so badly she dropped the locket and it swung back and forth on the chain firmly anchored in the dead man's hand. In the last flare of the match, Connors saw the initial H was carved on the other side of the bulge.

"You know her?" he asked Eleana.

She gasped, "It's a picture of mother when she was about my age."

The ague extended to her knees. Connors stood up and slipped an arm around her waist. He knew what she was thinking—D. H.—Donald Hayes.

Tightening his arm around her waist he walked her out into the patio. A paunchy Mexican business man was smoking a last cigar before his supper. He took the cigar from his mouth and bowed graciously.

"Buenas tardes, Señor, Señora."

Connors returned the bow. *"Buenas tardes, Señor."*

Back in his room he sat Eleana on the bed and closed the windows. Her face was as white as the flowers appliqued on the *rebozo*. He opened the bottle of rum, splashed some in a glass and offered it to her.

Eleana shook her head. "No thank you."

Connors drank what he'd splashed in the glass, then took a big drink from the neck of the bottle. He needed it. His knees were as weak as Eleana's. No one needed to tell him

what could and probably would happen. A man was dead, just across the patio. And they had inquired for him.

Now he had two dead men to worry about.

CHAPTER FOUR

Night continued to fill the patio until it absorbed even the trunks of the trees. The smell of the flowers was sickening. Some color returning to her cheeks, Eleana asked Connors if he didn't think they should report what they had found to the police.

He said, "And find they're already looking for me for killing General Estaban? No thank you. Besides as soon as the body is found the police will come to us. The first thing we did when we checked in was attempt to contact Santchez."

"Damn and double damn," Eleana swore.

"All of that," Connors agreed. He wiped cold sweat from his forehead. "I'm going to wind up against a wall yet. And after the police will come the reporters. What are you going to tell them?"

Eleana gave him a dirty look. "You got me into this."

"Not me. All I tried to do was get a free ride to the border."

"You think my father killed him?"

Connors lighted a cigarette. "I haven't the least idea. The locket with your mother's picture would seem to indicate he did."

When Eleana was excited her faint drawl was more pronounced. "But why?"

Connors said, "There could be a dozen reasons. Maybe Santchez had something on your father he didn't want Santchez to tell you. You say your father is wanted for murder in the States. That in itself is ample reason for him to want to keep his present identity and whereabouts a secret."

Eleana changed her mind. "Please mix me a drink, Ad."

Connors added cola to the rum, trying to evaluate the situation. There was no light in Santchez's room. Unless the lawyer had made an evening appointment with the old friend his secretary had mentioned, the chances were his body wouldn't be found until morning. And by morning they could be miles away.

Eleana asked, "How far is it from here to Guadalajara?"

Connors picked the road map from the dresser. "Two hundred and twenty miles. And it's four hundred and thirty miles from Guadalajara to El Mante. And three hundred and ten miles from El Mante on up to Laredo. But if we run, once Santchez's body is found, every federal, state, and city cop along the way will be looking for a '50 gray Ford coupe with Illinois license plates."

"You mean they'll think we killed Attorney Santchez?"

Connors pointed out, "Mexican police aren't any different from other police. They like their jobs. Consequently they're going to try to find out who killed Santchez. Maybe it was your father. Maybe it was someone else. If the Uruapan police can find him and convict him, fine. But if they can't they're going to try to pin this thing on anyone who could have done it. And if we run we're going to look guilty." He shrugged. "On the other hand, for all we know, they may be looking for us now."

Eleana nibbled at her lower lip. "Then run or stay, we're stuck."

"Yeah. Run or stay we're stuck."

Eleana asked for another drink. "And a cigarette if you please."

Connors mixed a drink but the cigarette pack was empty. "Sit tight. I'll get some," he said.

Eleana caught at his arm. "Don't be long, Ad. Please."

It was the first surface sign she'd shown of fear. Connors admired her for it. She was people. He stooped and kissed her. "Know something, honey. I like you."

"I like you, too," she told him.

There was no cigar counter in the hotel. There was a *cantina* a few doors up the street. Connors bought some cigarettes and paused in the doorway to light one before returning to the room.

The Cadillac parking in front of the hotel was black and familiar looking. So was the chauffeur's face. As Connors watched it through the flare of the match, *Generale* Estaban got out. He hadn't killed him after all. Estaban hadn't been dead but unconscious. All he had done was wound him and the shock of the slug and the liquor he'd consumed had done the rest.

Two big men followed Estaban to the walk. The tribe looked the same the world over. They could only be plainclothes police. One of them walked into the hotel. Sweat trickling down his spine, Connors left the lighted doorway and pressed his back against the adobe wall next to it. Estaban was out for blood, and he had found them. His face hadn't been as important to him as getting even. But how had he found them? Then Connors thought of the receipted repair bill. He had discussed Uruapan at length with the mechanic who had repaired Eleana's car.

Connors snuffed out his cigarette lest the glow of it call attention to him. The small of his back ached. Knots developed in his calves. He hadn't the least idea what Estaban had meant to charge him with. Attempted murder probably. It didn't matter now. The general had a better club. A dead lawyer.

The plainclothes man came out of the hotel grinning. He and his partner and Estaban promptly went into a huddle. Connors seized on the opportunity to slip into the dark patio.

Eleana was still sitting on the bed nursing her second drink. She looked up as he came in the window.

"Estaban's alive and outside," Connors told her. "He just drove up with two detectives and they've already confirmed the fact we're here." He slipped into his coat. "I'm going to run. You'd better stay. As far as I'm concerned this is a shoot-

ing matter. But nothing much worse than Estaban is apt to happen to you."

Eleana said, "I'm going with you."

Connors didn't have time to argue. He expected, momentarily, to see the light in the room across the patio go on. The first thing the detectives would do would be to contact Santchez to learn Eleana's business with him. He snatched the *rebozo* from the bed. "Then let's go."

"But our bags?"

"We'll have to leave them. And remember this. I don't know where I'm going. I don't know how I'm going to get there. Maybe you'd better stay."

Eleana picked up her purse, folded the *rebozo* over her head as if she'd worn one all her life and walked out into the patio.

The last window on their side opened into the lobby. Through it they could see General Estaban and the two detectives talking to the desk clerk. Connors tightened his grip on Eleana's arm and stopped her under a giant live oak just the dark side of the bright yellow runner laid down by the street lamps and the headlights of the passing cars. A drawn revolver in his hand the chauffeur was leaning against the front fender of the Cadillac, watching the front door of the hotel.

It was evening and warm. The walk had its usual evening complement of giggling girls walking with their arms entwined and admiring knots of strolling young men. Connors waited until three particularly pretty girls walked by in the opposite direction from the one in which he wished to go. As he'd hoped, the chauffeur's eyes patted their plump buttocks up the street.

"Now," he told Eleana.

They moved out into the crowd on the walk. His eyes filmed with sweat, the muscles of his back tensed against the shout or shot he expected to hear at any moment, Connors forced himself to stroll.

So far, so good. They were out of the hotel.

Then he realized Eleana was crying. Tears might attract attention. He told her to stop or he'd slap her. She stopped crying and asked:

"Now what are we going to do?"

"I want to get the car if I can," Connors said.

He didn't hope to drive out of town in it. They wouldn't get far if they did. All hell was due to pop in a few minutes. But if he could get the Ford out of the lot and under cover it might help confuse their trail.

He told Eleana what he was going to try to do and left her on a bench in the Plaza with instructions not to move or talk to anyone. Then, walking around the block, he came at the hotel from the rear. The parking lot was dark and silent but Attorney Santchez's body had been found. The patio was filled with excited voices and bright with a portable trouble light.

Connors eased the car out of the lot. Then he parked on a dark side street while he tried to figure his best move.

There was a car with Federal District license plates parked a few yards up the street in front of a building under construction. Finding a screw driver and a pair of pinchers in the back of the Ford, Connors took the plates off both cars, put the Mexican plates on the Ford and hid the Illinois plates under a pile of used lumber.

Then he drove on to the market section in search of a second hand store. He got the kind of a black suit he wanted for twenty-eight pesos. It was threadbare and none too clean but it looked as though it might fit him. A broad brimmed black hat cost eight pesos more. He bought new things for Eleana, a black full skirt and a ruffled white off-the-shoulder blouse. The shoes she was wearing would have to do. He didn't know her size.

Then rolling the things in a bundle he drove back to the bench on which Eleana was waiting. Eleana was in the car almost before he'd stopped. Connors laid the bundle in her

lap. "I'm going to drive out a way and we're going to put these on. From now on we're strictly Mex. I do all the talking. And no argument."

"I'm not arguing," Eleana drawled. Her voice sounded as if her throat hurt her.

Connors stopped at the first secluded spot he came to, stripped off the suit he was wearing and put on the black one. It smelled and it bagged at the knees and elbows but it didn't fit him too badly. With sufficient dirt under his nails he could pass as one of the letter writing scribes that infest every plaza and market place in Mexico.

Eleana struggled out of her smart gray suit. Some of her tension had left her. "If my pupils could see me now."

Connors wished he could see her better. Keyed up as he was, just catching glimpses of white flesh excited him. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

Limp in his arms, Eleana asked, "Are you certain you aren't sleepy?"

Connors sat back on his side of the car. Then when Eleana was dressed, he drove back into town. To reach the bus station he had to pass the Morales. There were two local police cars in back of the Cadillac now. He drove on and parked across from the bus station.

"Now what?" Eleana asked.

"We're going to try to get out by bus," he told her.

Satisfied his own clothes would pass, he inspected Eleana in the yellow pool of a street lamp. Both the teacher and the *turista* were gone with the gray suit. The *rebozo* brought out the green in her eyes. The full skirt was short enough to show her legs to good advantage. Just enough of the round of her breasts showed to focus male attention away from the lightness of her skin. He told her to smear on more lipstick. She did. It gave her a bold look. She was still pretty enough to eat but her smeared lips dropped her down into the class of the sentinels prowling the street in front of the bus station, trying to pick up some two-peso trade.

A bus for Guadalajara was scheduled to leave in fifteen minutes and was waiting on the apron of the station. Connors bought two tickets and put Eleana in the unlighted bus with instructions to hold a seat for him but not to dare speak one word of English.

"I'm frightened," Eleana said.

Connors swallowed the lump in his own throat. "That's odd. But come to think of it, I've felt better myself."

He walked back to the Ford, unscrewed two of the spark plugs, cracked them with the handle of the screw-driver, and screwed them in again. The Ford bucked and chattered and back-fired when he pulled away from the curb. He barely made the garage he'd spotted up the street. Once inside the big door the coupe gave a realistic shudder and pooped out.

The lone mechanic on duty wasn't pleased to see him. This was Saturday night. As God was his judge he had been on his way to close the door when Connors had driven in. He couldn't possibly work on the car until Monday, possibly Tuesday morning.

Connors said that was all right with him. And that took care of the car. It would be days, perhaps a week, before the police would think to check the local garages for the car that wasn't turning up at any of their control points or inspection stations.

He made the bus with minutes to spare. It was packed with women and children and drunks and home-bound Indians carrying the live chickens and fruits and melons that they had been unable to sell. Eleana was holding a seat for him but it was the last one on the bus and she was having trouble with two drunks who were making remarks about her that Connors was just as well pleased she couldn't understand.

Departure time passed by five minutes, ten. Connors began to sweat again. He wondered if he had underestimated the Mexico City plainclothes men General Estaban had

brought with him. It was just possible the two detectives had ordered all traffic out of Uruapan stopped.

Still more people crowded into the bus. Then the driver appeared out of nowhere, slammed the folding door shut in the faces of still other would-be passengers, and engaged his clutch with a jerk that would have sent all the standees sprawling if they hadn't been packed in so tightly.

Eleana's fingers bit into Ad's wrist. He put his arm around her. Twice on their way to the outskirts of Uruapan police cars with wailing sirens passed the bus. Out fifteen miles where the highway made junction with the new road leading to Paricutin Volcano, another police car was stationed. But the policemen standing beside it merely looked at the bus. They were waiting for a 1950 model gray Ford coupe with Illinois license plates.

The night grew old and darker. Now and then the bus stopped in a pool of blackness to allow a passenger to disembark at some invisible group of huts or lonely crossroad. The rest of the time Connors had to hold Eleana in his arms to keep her upright in the seat as the bus swayed around curves and scampered down down-grades with its gas pedal pushed to the floor.

It was hot in the bus and smelled of unwashed bodies, overripe melons, and chickens. Connors took off his coat and loosened the knot in his tie. Eleana kicked off her shoes and sat with her feet curled under her.

Once at a lonely outpost near a bridge they caught sight of a rifle-armed sentry. A dozen times faster traveling cars passed the bus. Connors hoped they weren't police cars.

It was two o'clock in the morning when the bus rolled into Guadalajara. There was a fat policeman on the walk in front of the bus station but he paid no attention to them. The hue and cry hadn't spread this far as yet. The police were still confident they had them bottled up on the spur that led to Uruapan.

Both Eleana and Connors were hungry. They ate in an all-night lunchroom a few doors from the bus station, neither of them saying much. Then Connors located a cheap hotel with a flashing red neon sign. There was no nonsense this time about rooms with a connecting bath. Connors registered as *Señor* and *Señora* Gomez, Mexico City, D.F.

A sweet-faced Indian woman called Eleana a pretty child, took the eight *pesos* she asked for, and showed them to their room.

It was more a cell than a room. The walls were white plaster, unpainted. There was a three-quarters bed, a wash stand, and one chair. The light was an unshaded bulb in the ceiling. The flashing neon sign was directly outside the window.

When the Indian woman had gone, Connors switched off the ceiling light and walked to the window and raised the shade. The sign would give all the light that was needed.

The sign flashed off as he turned. Across the small room, Eleana's eyes were cat-green in the dark. Then the sign flashed on again. Eleana's clothes lay in a black and white pool at her feet. The only thing she had on was lipstick.

There was a great roaring in Connors' ears. He found it difficult to breathe.

Then Eleana ran her hands over her breasts. In the flick on and off of the sign hard pink nipple tips found their way out from between her splayed fingers. Connors could see the muscles in her groin move.

They had no need of words.

There were big bells, little bells, loud bells, mellow bells, cracked bells. They pealed on for what seemed like hours, tolling the faithful to church.

Her passion spent, Eleana lay content to have Ad hold her. "I still like you, Ad."

"I still like you, Eleana," he told her.

Connors' respect for Eleana had grown immeasurably.

There were no tears. No regrets. No false shame. What was done was done. It had been beautiful. But they couldn't stay where they were. They had to move on. Today. A man named Caesar A. Santchez was dead in Uruapan. Every policeman in Mexico was, or would be, looking for them.

It seemed to Connors the best thing for them to do would be to continue by bus. A plane or a train would be faster. But questions might be asked. And there still was the border to cross.

He asked Eleana if she had her motor club guide book in her purse. Eleana said she thought she had and got up to get it and her glasses. Before returning to the bed she stopped and looked out the window. There wasn't much to see. It was the usual early morning big city scene near almost any bus station; old buildings, narrow dirty streets, trash cans and debris.

Sitting on the edge of the bed she adjusted her glasses, then wanted to know what Ad was laughing at.

He told her. "You. This is the first time I've ever been in the same room with an elementary school teacher whose only article of dress was a pair of rimless glasses."

Eleana looked at him over her glasses. "You don't like the effect?"

Ad said, "I think it's cute as hell."

Her eyes had been smiling. They sobered. She laid the guide book on the bed, took off her glasses and leaned over him, one arm on each side of his chest. "Let's talk a little sense for a change, Ad. What are we going to do?"

Having her so near excited Connors. He tried to fondle her and Eleana put his hand back on the bed. She was worried. She had reason to be. Even if they made it across the border without being stopped she still would have plenty to explain.

"You still figuring on marrying Lautenbach?" Connors asked. He was sorry he'd brought up the subject. It left a sour taste in his mouth.

"Yes," Eleana drawled. "I am." She brushed his lips with hers but her eyes were all gray now. "You see, sweetheart, this is it. I mean the last time. And while I'm not sorry it happened, this sort of thing isn't ever going to happen again."

"Not with anyone?"

"Not after I'm married to Allan."

Connors picked the guide book from the bed and found the page with the main numbered highways on it. They were closer to Laredo or Brownsville than they were to El Paso. But for that very reason the border watch would undoubtedly be intensified at those two points.

If possible, he wanted to stay off Mexico *1*. Even if the police found Eleana's car and knew they were using public transportation the police would expect them to head out through Laredo. Against that, there wasn't a sign of a road, at least in the guide book, between Guadalajara and Torreon which would be the logical take-off point for Ciudad Juarez and El Paso.

Eleana took the guide book away from him. "I asked you what we were going to do."

"Head out through Juarez if we can," he told her.

Some of the green came back into Eleana's eyes. She made a little mountain peak by twisting a tuft of hair on his chest between her fingers. "The how is up to you. All I have to do is pay the expenses. Remember?"

Connors lay silent a long moment, thinking. Then he asked, "How much money have you, Eleana?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "That is, exactly. But I had five hundred dollars when I started and I must have over three hundred of it left."

"In cash?"

"No. In travelers' checks. I doubt if I have more than a few pesos in cash. I spent a lot in Uruapan."

Connors did some mental arithmetic. He'd had one hundred and thirty-two pesos, plus the two hundred and forty-five he'd gotten from General Estaban. Gas and oil and

breakfast in Morelia had cost twenty-four *pesos*. He'd spent six for the flowers, eleven for the rum and coke, sixty for the *rebozo*. His suit and hat had taken twenty-eight and eight, or thirty-six. Eleana's skirt and blouse had come to almost eighty. Then there had been the bus fare. Their night lunch had cost six *pesos*. He'd given their landlady eight more. He totaled up the money he'd paid out, subtracted it from the sum he had, and, if his mental arithmetic was correct, they had around ninety-six *pesos* or seventeen dollars American to feed and shelter themselves and buy two bus tickets to the border.

Connors checked his arithmetic against the money in his wallet. He hadn't made a mistake. They had ninety-four *pesos* in bills and a handful of assorted *centavo* pieces, plus what little Eleana had in her purse.

He tossed the money on the bed. "That's it."

Eleana started to contradict him. Then she realized what he meant. They didn't dare cash her travelers' checks. As far as she and Ad were concerned, they were the hottest pieces of paper in Mexico.

They had her name on them.

CHAPTER FIVE

Connors lay back on the bed. "There's no use kidding ourselves. We're in a bad spot. By now our names and descriptions have been broadcast and the police in every little town on the way to the border have been alerted. You haven't anyone you could wire for money?"

He offered Eleana a puff of his cigarette. She drew the smoke into her lungs then drawled, "There's mother and Uncle John. But they wouldn't wire any money to *Senora* Gomez. Besides I don't want them to know about this."

Connors reclaimed his cigarette. They had registered in Uruapan as *Señor* Schmidt and *Señorita* Braun. But Estaban

knew Eleana's right name and there had been plenty of old letters in his bags. Then he thought of Shad.

It was just possible Shad might wire him another advance if he put on plenty of pressure. He could call Shad long distance in the morning. That way he wouldn't have to give his name. But whether Shad would stand for a bite, at least as big a bite as was needed, was another matter.

"I think I've got it," he said. "I'll call my agent in the morning and have him advance me some money."

"He'll do that?" Eleana asked.

There was no need for both of them to worry. "Of course he will," Connors assured her.

He dressed and walked up to the lunchroom in which they'd eaten the night before and bought a sackful of cold chicken *tacos*, a paper container of hot *frijoles*, and two quart milk bottles of coffee.

Enroute back to their room he met their Indian landlady and gave her another eight *pesos*, saying that he and the *señora* would require the room for at least one more night.

"Si, Señor," the woman beamed.

The breakfast tasted good. Eleana and Connors ate everything in the sack and could have eaten more. After eating, they slept. It was early evening and the church bells were pealing again when Eleana opened her eyes and snuggling closer to Connors, kissed the lobe of his ear.

"Know something, Mister?"

Connors held her even closer. "What?"

"I still like you."

Eleana stopped kissing his ear and began to nibble at it. Then their bodies met and sleep was out of the question.

When it was dark they dressed and went out to eat. Connors doubted that anyone would pay any attention to them so long as they stayed away from the tourist traps and Eleana didn't try to speak Spanish. He'd suggested she wear her hair in twin braids that hung down over her breasts. It made her look younger than she was and plenty Mex. But

the moment she opened her mouth, her trace of a Missouri drawl gave the show away.

After eating they window-shopped. Then, shortly after eight o'clock on a narrow picturesque back street they came on a street carnival and Eleana insisted on riding the carousel. Connors bought her a strip of tickets and stood leaning against a warehouse, fanning himself with his broad-brimmed hat, as he watched her go around and around, big-eyed with delight.

Eleana wasn't pretending to have a good time. She was having a good time. The little brunette wasn't immoral. She wasn't amoral. She wasn't merely uninhibited. She was *Woman, naked and unashamed, before man, starting with the serpent*, had attached a penalty and a stigma to a perfectly natural appetite.

The same feeling of sadness that Connors had known in Uruapan returned. The hell of it was he didn't know who he felt sorry for, himself or Allan Lautenbach.

The phone booth was hot and small. The connection was bad. The local long distance operator refused to accept a collect call. When Connors did get Shad the other man thought he was drunk and it cost him another five pesos to convince his agent he was sober.

Even then Shad didn't go for the bite. He pointed out that Connors was already into the office for fourteen hundred dollars and every other pulp-hack on his string was screaming bloody murder. He'd had lunch with Jack Blade and Maxie Fallow on Friday last. If Connors wanted to put the new book aside, Shad thought he could pick up some quick money for him. Both Jack and Maxie had said they would take a lead novel from Ad if he would put the same old time punch in them.

Connors asked how much the boys would pay.

Shad's voice sounded thin and distorted. "Two and a half pennies a word."

"That's fine with me," Connors shouted into the phone. "I'll get the scripts in the mail as fast as I can turn them out. But I'll have to have some money."

His agent shied away again but finally agreed to wire fifty dollars immediately and advance the balance of the money, minus commission as soon as the scripts were on his desk. He pleaded, "But for God's sake, Ad, make them good. If the boys don't voucher them, I'm sunk."

"I'll do my best," Connors shouted. "Now write down this address. Wire the money to *Senor A. Gomez*, Room 216, Hotel Navidad, Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. You got that?"

The thin voice in New York said, "I have. But what the hell are you doing in Guadalajara?"

"That," Connors said, "is a long story," and hung up while he still had enough money left to buy a bottle of tequila.

He needed it. He was calling from the best hotel in town, one patronized chiefly by tourists. During the course of their conversation, Shad had called him by name not once but several times. He half expected a squad of police to swarm out from behind the potted palms as he stepped from the booth.

Both the armpits and the back of his threadbare coat were sodden with perspiration as he settled his bill with the switchboard operator and walked stiff-kneed through the lobby. He walked and looked as if he was drunk.

An overstuffed Iowa matron drew her skirt aside as he passed. "Disgusting," she said. "Disgusting."

Connors spat, "*Turista*," and walked on.

Out in the heat of the street again he bought a litro of tequila and took a big swig from the neck of the bottle. It thawed the lump of ice in his stomach but the mild glow the liquor induced faded in the first shop in which he tried to rent a typewriter.

They had three machines with English keyboards, a Royal, an Underwood, and a beat-up Oliver. But they demanded a stiff deposit or three local business references. It was the same

in the next two shops Connors tried. He finally found a pawnshop owner who agreed to sell him a battered old three bank Corona for seventy-five *pesos* and he put down a small deposit to hold it until his money arrived. Then, a propitious gesture toward the fates, he spent his last seven *pesos* for paper and a few sheets of carbon. If Shad failed to come through, they were sunk.

When he got back to the room, Eleana was being domestic. She'd washed her stockings and scanties and blouse and now that she had washed the blouse she was wondering how she was going to iron it. Connors went back down stairs, located their Indian landlady, informed her that he and the *señora* would be with her for at least three more nights, and borrowed an electric iron and ironing board.

Eleana thanked him for the iron and board. "When do we leave?"

"Not for three or four days," Connors said. "Possibly not for a week." He outlined the deal he'd had to make with his agent.

Eleana set up the ironing board. "Well, if we can't leave tonight, we can't." She seemed more pleased than worried. "And how much will you get for the stories?"

Connors sat on the bed, admiring her. "That depends."

"On what?"

"On what length stories I do. Because of the paper situation most of the pulp editors have cut their lead novels from fifteen to twelve thousand words. But as long as Jack and Maxie asked for copy from me, I'm going to try them with fifteens. That means I'll get about seven hundred and fifty dollars, minus ten percent and whatever it costs Shad to wire it."

Eleana tested the heat of the iron with a wet finger. "What are you going to write about?"

"The man," Connors said, "is dead. He was stabbed, he was shot, he was pushed off a cliff, he was poisoned. Now who in the world could have done it?"

Eleana ironed her blouse, her skirt, and the *rebozo*. Then she insisted on washing Ad's shirt. He killed the rest of the morning nipping at the tequila he'd bought and trying to dredge up a couple of plots without too much mould on them. At one o'clock they ate on four of the ten *pesos* Eleana had in her purse. The wired money from Shad came just in time for Ad to reach the pawnshop before it closed. Then, what with the telegram, the typewriter, and paying four more nights rent in advance he was able to borrow a fairly steady card table on which to work.

On his way back from the pawnshop he picked up a local newspaper. He and Eleana were on the front page but the press was still calling them *Señor Schmidt* and *Señorita Braun*. More, the Uruapan police were playing it cagey. They hadn't been charged with the murder as yet. Outside of a poor description all that was said about them was that the Uruapan police were very eager to question them concerning the violent decease of Caesar A. Santchez an attorney from Mexico City. But their real identity was known. The tip-off was revealed in a paragraph stating that *Señor Schmidt* and *Señorita Braun* were driving a 1950 model gray Ford coupe with Estados Unidos license plates from the state of Illinois. Anyone seeing them or the car was requested to notify the police immediately.

There was more, but not about them. The newspaper story described Santchez as a successful lawyer and quite a ladies' man. There was no mention made of the chain or locket but some prominence was given to a bellboy's testimony that a beautiful, heavily veiled *señora* had spent the preceding night in Attorney Santchez's room.

Eleana was every bit as smug as Attorney Santchez's secretary had been. "Hm. I wonder who his girl friend was."

"I wish we knew," Connors said. "Maybe it wasn't your father who killed him. Maybe her husband did."

He put a piece of carbon paper between a white first and

a yellow second sheet, rolled them into the Corona and wrote—

Ad Connors
Guadalajara,
Republica Mejicana

(Approx. 15,000 words)

KILL ME, MAÑANA

Eleana laughed. "So that's the way it's done."

Connors grinned at her. "At least it's the way I do it." He clicked the carriage across the frame of the old three bank, fiddling for an idea. "Okay. I have a dead man. He was a Mexican attorney."

Eleana was shocked. "You're not going to use Attorney Santchez in your story?"

Connors shrugged. "Why not? He's dead." He continued to think aloud. "He was stabbed. His room was on the first floor and his window was open so how the killer got to him isn't of any importance. The thing that matters is who killed him, and why? The first half of that one is easy. He was killed by a former North American circus owner who skipped the States twenty years ago with a bundle of Mexican fluff and fifty thousand dollars, half of which rightfully belonged to his brother. No. I'd better make that one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Fifty thousand is peanuts nowadays. But why did the former circus owner kill the attorney? And where to begin and how to complicate it and what to use for suspense and counter plot?"

He took a sip of tequila and waited for lightning to strike.

It was hot in the room. Eleana took off her blouse so she wouldn't wrinkle it and lay down on the bed in her skirt and bra. "Is there going to be a girl in your story?"

"Um hmm."

"Me?"

Connors shook his head. "No. The pulps were raided once and they've been afraid of sex ever since. You can have a girl in your story. You have to have a girl in your story. She has to be the most beautiful little bitch whose mammary glands ever graced the dust jacket of a best seller. And you can beat her or break her legs or stab or poison or shoot her. But nothing but murder and mayhem can happen to her. She can be cooped up for thirty days and thirty nights with an escaped con who hasn't seen a woman in twenty-two years until he went over the wall. But you don't dare let him lay a hand on her. He can't even think evil thoughts." Connors amended his statement. "Well, maybe he can leer a little. But even then she doesn't know what he means. She still believes the stork brought her and wonders why everyone laughed when the little boy seeing the groom kiss the bride, asked, 'Mama, is he putting the pollen on her now?'"

Eleana laughed until she had to get up and get a glass of water.

Connors ripped out the title page he'd written, rolled a yellow second sheet under the platen and wrote:

Bill Brown: Hardboiled, expatriate, oil man and former circus owner who killed the husband of the Mexican girl with whom he skipped to Mexico, (twenty years before) deserting his American wife and infant daughter. (Has been sending fifty dollars a month ever since for said daughter's support.)

Conchita: Former high-wire artiste. (Now a trifle stout at thirty-nine but still a beautiful woman.)

Sabines: Mexico City Attorney through whom Bill Brown has been contributing the fifty dollars a month to his daughter's support, lo, all these many years.

Connors stuck there. By killing Attorney Santchez as he had, if he had killed him, Eleana's father must have known he was putting Eleana on a spot. So it was necessary for him to shut Santchez's mouth. It seemed, at least to Connors, a man with as well-developed a sense of responsibility would have handled the matter differently. Still a man pressed to the act of murder was seldom in a position to observe the niceties. "What sort of a man was your father?" he asked Eleana.

She said, "I don't remember him. Mother says he was nice."

"She knew he was in love with this girl?"

"I don't know."

"Had there been any other women?"

"I don't know that either," Eleana drawled. "Mother never talks much about father. And every time Uncle John or someone else mentions him she cries."

"She's still in love with him, eh?"

"I suppose so. At least she's never married again."

"What sort of a looking man was he?"

"Good looking. Tall. Gray-eyed with little laugh wrinkles around his eyes. High cheek bones like mine."

"I thought you said you didn't remember him."

Eleana wrinkled her nose at Ad. "Smarty. That's a description from one of mother's pictures of him. But why all the questions about my father?"

Connors lighted a cigarette and offered her a puff. "I'm trying to talk myself into believing it wasn't Donald Hayes who killed Santchez."

"Why?"

"I think I could make a better story with another killer."

"But that locket?"

"The locket could be a plant." Connors enthused slightly. "Hey. How about Conchita? She's still presumably living with your father. Why couldn't Conchita have intercepted Attorney Santchez's letter to your father saying you were

coming to Mexico. Then, after intercepting the letter, she lured Santchez to Uruapan with the promise of an assignation and shoved her knife in him to keep him from getting in touch with your father and your father from getting in touch with you?"

Eleana's bra was binding her. She sat up and unhooked it. "And just who is Conchita?"

"The Mexican high-wire walker your dad ran away with."

The school teacher in Eleana came out. "With *whom* Dad ran away. Only her name wasn't Conchita. It was Tamara."

"Tamara isn't a Mexican name."

Eleana shrugged. "It was the name of the girl with whom father ran away. But why should she want to kill Santchez?"

"I just told you. To keep your father from getting in touch with you." Connors built his story in his mind. "Twenty years have passed. Tamara's getting old. Her once beautiful body has begun to sag. She has a double chin."

Eleana took the cigarette from his fingers. "Which should be a big inducement to a ladies' man."

Connors ignored her. "She knows your father is tired of her. She's afraid if he saw you it might awaken old memories and he might decide to go back to the States."

"Where he is wanted for murder."

"I'd forgotten that," Connors admitted.

Eleana puffed on the cigarette and returned it. "No. That won't wash, Ad. Besides, Tamara is dead. In the letter father sent to Uncle John, the one with the draft for five thousand dollars in it, father said it had all been for nothing as Tamara had been killed in an accident shortly after they'd reached Mexico."

"I thought you said your uncle never recovered a penny."

"He didn't." Eleana explained. "That letter came years ago. Mother says Uncle John was raising hob about father sending money for me and not even a thank you, I'm sorry, kiss-the-back-of-my-hand to him. Then the letter and bank

draft came along and cooled him down. But mother was having it so tough about then that Uncle John turned the five thousand over to her to make the down payment on the house we're still living in."

"In which we are still living," Connors corrected her. He drew a pencil line around the name Conchita. "I don't suppose you know what type of weapon your father used to kill Tamara's husband?"

Eleana said, "I think it was a knife." She got up and looked out the window.

"All right," Connors said. "The hell with it. Your father killed Santchez." He ripped the yellow sheet out of the typewriter and crumpled it into a ball. Then, kicking off his shoes, he lay down on the bed.

Eleana came back from the window and sat beside him. "I got you into this, didn't I, Ad? You're worried. And so am I. I don't see, under the circumstances, how you expect to think. But what *are* we going to do?"

Connors kissed the tips of her fingers. "I'm going to write two fifteen thousand word pulp novels. Shad is going to wire me six hundred and fifty more dollars. We're going to use part of the money to buy two bus tickets to Juarez and spend the rest of it on room service and champagne in the best hotel in El Paso." He kneaded the back of her neck. "Say. By the way. Did I ever tell you I liked you?"

Eleana breathed a little harder. Her drawl was a trifle more pronounced. "It seems to me I've heard you mention it."

"Recently?"

"Well, come to think of it, not for quite a few hours."

Connors pulled her down until their lips met.

"No, Ad," she protested, not strongly.

The unhooked bra slipped off her shoulders providing more kissable surface. Green crowded the gray from her eyes. The walls of the room expanded. The street noises died away. A train whistled faintly in the distance. Then it, too,

faded into the night and they were alone in the world. Eleana compromised.

"At least let me take off my skirt."

CHAPTER SIX

It was too early even for the bells when Connors wrote—30—on the bottom of Page 60 and pushed back his chair. It had been a long time since he had done so much work so fast. He liked what he had written.

The Book-Of-The-Month Club would never buy the story. But it hadn't been written for them. It was good old fashioned pulp with a punch in every paragraph and a corpse on every other page.

He tiptoed to the window and looked out. Both Guadalajara and Eleana still slept. But the city was beginning to stir. He stood watching the growing dawn, wishing he had a pot of coffee. Outside of that, he felt fine. He'd written a good yarn. Turned around the way it was, Connors doubted if Eleana or her mother or her Uncle John, or anyone in Blue Mound, would recognize it. But it was good salable murder.

He'd made the Hayes boys cousins instead of brothers. And instead of them being good fellows, he'd made both of them heels. Eleana's father had started for California but had stopped off in Chicago and had raised the money there. This had returned him to Blue Mound a week before he was expected. He had returned to find his cousin forcing his attentions on his wife. In the fight that followed the wronged-husband had been killed and the cousin had forced the widow to help him dispose of the body.

In his story, Eleana's Uncle John and not her father, had been making a play for the Mexican high-wire walker. Her husband, peering in through the window of the cottage while the fight was in progress had seen the murder committed and had immediately tried to blackmail the killer.

This had given the heel the idea for the perfect cover for his crime. He'd stabbed the Mexican, paid the girl to get out of town, then spread the news that his cousin had committed the murder and run away with the girl. The terrified widow, Eleana's mother, fearing death for herself and her child, had gone along with the story.

Before disposing of the body, John had taken the money from the corpse. But the whole town knew he was broke. To make his story stand up he had to play it cagey. He'd allowed the circus to fold. Then he had contacted a Mexican attorney who, for a fee, had sent fifty dollars a month to the dead man's daughter and, eventually, a letter to himself purporting to be from the dead man. This had a double effect. It salved his conscience and also established the alleged fact Eleana's father was still alive.

The Mexican attorney was the counterpart of Santchez. The immediate conflict began when Eleana, whom he had called Ailine, became engaged to a young prig and insisted on going to Mexico to ask her father for her mother's marriage license (which the dead man had had on his person the night he had been murdered and buried).

All her frantic mother could do was contact the cousin who was now a prosperous business man. His old sin had found him out. Once the girl talked to Attorney Santchez his house of cards would tumble. He'd done the only thing he could do. Packing a few clean shirts and an old locket and chain belonging to his dead cousin he had beaten the girl to Santchez.

But instead of using a writer to crack the mystery, he'd used a handsome young oil man who just *happened* to be staying at the same hotel as Ailine and who was charmed by her beauty and virtue. The young oil man, of course, got the girl. He also got the murderous cousin and once more murder came out and virtue triumphed.

It was corn fresh from the cob. But if Jack Blade didn't like it the pressure of the pulp racket had finally caused Jack

to blow his top and he ought to be moved out of his office into the boiler room next to the fifth assistant reader. Gaggling a little, Connors separated the white from the second sheets and lay down beside Eleana.

It was late afternoon when he awakened. Eleana was sitting on the window sill being very still. When she saw his eyes were open she came over and sat on the bed. "What did you do? Work all night, sweetheart?"

Connors said he had and asked her for a cigarette. She lighted one and gave it to him and he remarked she must be hungry.

Eleana shook her head. "No. For breakfast I had *huevos fritos* and *tostada*. And both the eggs and the toast were good."

Eleana's Spanish hadn't improved overnight. It worried Connors to think of her going out alone. The police had to be making some progress. The net had to be growing tighter with every hour that passed. One false move would bring the hounds down on them. He laid down the law. "From now on leave the Useful Spanish Words and Phrases in that goddam guide book alone. And don't leave the room without me. If you have to go out and I'm asleep, wake me up."

"My lord and masters speaks."

What with the tequila, too many cigarettes, and insufficient sleep, Connors' mouth felt like the inside of a sewer. "You read the yarn I wrote last night?"

"I did," Eleana drawled. "And it's a darn good story. But I see now what you mean by the difference between pulp and slick. It's all in the motivation of the story, the subject matter, and the way the characters react. For example, no one in real life would do the things you have them do or act the way you have mother and Uncle John acting."

Connors wasn't in the mood to discuss the finer points of writing. He blew smoke at the ceiling.

"In the first place," Eleana continued, "mother isn't the sweet, crying kind. Mother's a lot like I am. If Uncle John

had tried to rape her and then killed dad when he was caught at it, mother would have hit him with an ax."

"Before or after she'd been raped?"

"Before." Eleana ran a finger over the stubble of mustache Connors had left when he shaved. "In the second place, Uncle John—" She used the standard clichés in eulogizing her uncle. He was the soul of honor, a pillar of the church, a substantial business man. "Having father do what he did just about wrecked his life. Why he never even married for fear there might be some taint in their blood."

Connors kissed the finger on his lip. "Now who's getting corny?"

"It's the truth," Eleana insisted.

Connors grinned at her. "Okay. He's your uncle, not mine."

Dressed, he walked up to the restaurant near the bus station and forced himself to eat some eggs and toast. A policeman came in while he was eating. All he wanted was a small beer. But by the time the policeman had left, Connors' appetite was gone.

Back in the room he took off his coat and rolled fresh paper into the typewriter. The sooner the stories were in the mail, the sooner Shad would wire them enough money to move on. Guadalajara was too close to Uruapan. This wasn't a little scrape. This was murder. A man was dead. He was tagged. When the police blew their whistles this time it was, "Good morning, God. My name is Ad Connors. I was down in Mexico City trying to write a serious novel. In fact I had written it and mailed it to my agent. Then one morning as I cut across the Alameda to the postoffice I heard a Ford smack into a Cadillac—"

Eleana sat on the bed and sulked. Connors rolled up his sleeves, opened a vein and began to bleed.

The second story came harder. He called it A CORPSE FOR THE BRIDE and used Mike Herman, one of his series characters, as the chief protagonist.

It should have been an easy story to write. He'd written it in various forms perhaps two hundred times. A man was mysteriously murdered. His widow appealed to Herman for help. Herman promptly got on his bicycle and peddled like hell all over the place with assorted hoods taking pot shots at him and trying to bash in his skull for no particular reason. It was the same stock yat-a-ta-yat-a-ta-yat without a shred of basic emotion or originality in it. He'd hoped he'd gotten away from this sort of thing when he had written the long one the Post had turned down.

It took him two nights and a day and part of the third morning to get it down on paper. Eleana liked it much better than the first one.

Connors mailed both scripts via airmail then spent the rest of the afternoon checking on transportation. It was theoretically possible to get from Guadalajara to Torreon by bus, rather by a series of local buses. If they went by train they could ride the S.P. De M. to Mazatlan, the N. De M. out of Mazatlan to Durango and on up to Torreon, Chihuahua, and Ciudad Juarez. Or, if they dared to risk Mexico 1, it would be much faster to take a bus to San Luis Potosi and go out via Monterrey and Nuevo Laredo.

Still undecided, he bought an evening paper. He and Eleana were still on the front page. Newspaper readers were still being requested to report the gray Ford only now they were warned it might be carrying stolen Federal District license plates. That could be good. It could mean the police still expected to pick them up in the car. Still, it could mean they had found the car and didn't want him to know. Estaban knew he spoke fluent Spanish. The police knew it now. It seemed logical to assume they would reason he could also read it and would be watching the daily newspapers. In that case asking the public to look for a car that had already been found could be a ruse to tempt him to try to break out of the country via public transportation.

Before returning to the hotel, Connors walked back to

the railroad station, then to the bus terminal. There were uniformed police and men who might well be plainclothes men in both places but Connors had no way of knowing whether they were on regular duty or looking for him and Eleana.

He considered checking into another hotel to confuse their trail in case the police had tracked them to Guadalajara. But there, too, he was stuck. Shad would wire the money to *Señor A. Gomez* at the Hotel Navidad.

Eleana kissed him on his return to the room. "Now all we have to do is wait."

Connors realized the sweat on his forehead was cold. "Yes. Now all we have to do is wait."

He mailed the scripts on a Thursday. They reached Shad Schaeffer in New York the following Monday morning. At five o'clock their Indian landlady rapped excitedly on their door with the information that still another *telegrafiar* had arrived for *Señor Gomez*.

Connors took Eleana with him to collect the money. She wanted to know if they were going on by bus or train.

"I can't make up my mind," Connors told her. "But one way or another, we've moving on. Tonight."

The past three days hadn't done his nerves any good. He knew how Estaban must feel after the shooting in the Flamingo. The Mexican general would make it his personal business to see that they were found. After collecting the money, Connors had walked Eleana almost back to the Navidad when he noticed the commotion in the lobby of the Hotel Progreso directly across the street from the bus station. Men and women were being lined up against the lobby wall by an officious police captain. Connors thought at first that the hotel was being raided. Then he saw a familiar face. It was the hotel clerk from Uruapan. As he watched, the police officer walked the hotel man down the line of men and women and the clerk peered intently at each face.

Eleana's fingers bit into Connors' arm. "What's the matter?"

Connors told her. "The police know or suspect we're in Guadalajara. They're shaking down the hotels. And the clerk from the Morales has been sent along to identify us."

There were two buses waiting on the apron of the station. One was marked Mexico City, the other San Luis Potosi. Connors considered blind flight and resisted the temptation. He would have to buy tickets in the station. Both the agent and the driver would be able to describe them and point a finger in the direction they'd gone. They would be even worse off in Mexico City than they were in Guadalajara. But if they could get out of Guadalajara and board the east bound bus at some small way point enroute they might still have a chance to escape the closing net.

There were two other hotels between the Progreso and the Hotel Navidad. Both would absorb some time. When the police did reach the Navidad and describe them their Indian landlady would take them up to Room 216. He'd said nothing about checking out. The police, certain they had found them, would wait for their return before extending their search.

The palms of his hands as wet as if he had just washed them, Connors said, curtly, "Wait." Then he strode into the bus station and bought two tickets for Mexico City, making certain the agent would remember him by paying for the tickets with a one hundred *peso* note. He studied the road map back of the desk while the agent made change, then returning to Eleana, Connors walked her two blocks back down the street to a taxi stand and engaged a driver to take them to Zapotlanejo, the next small town twenty-three miles east of Guadalajara.

Safely out of town and on their way, he handed the bus tickets to Eleana. "Tear them up and throw them out the window."

Eleana looked at the tickets, puzzled. "What are they?"

"Two very slim red herrings," Connors said.

At Zapotlanejo they waited for the San Luis Potosi bus and rode it to Lagos De Moreno. Short jumps were the rule from then on. They rode between two towns and spent the night at the local hotel. Most of them made the Hotel Navidad resemble the Waldorf Astoria. But no one tried to stop them. There was no screening of local passengers. And by the time they reached Monterrey, Connors doubted if General Estaban would have recognized them.

Both of them were filthy. His mustache had come out strong and black. He'd bought Eleana a coarse blue cotton *rebozo* to replace the silk one. She wore a flower in one of her braids. Her rumpled white blouse exposed her suntanned breasts almost down to their nipples. The Chicago school teacher was gone. Her cheeks hollowed with strain and with deep blue circles under her eyes, Eleana looked like a little half-breed who had given up the struggle to live up to her Mexican blood. They ate what they could buy in local restaurants and bus stops with an occasional drink of rum to act as a prophylactic.

Both of them were starting at shadows by the time they reached Nuevo Laredo but no one paid any attention to them as they got off the bus. Eleana could have cried. So much had happened. They had come so far. Safety lay just over the bridge. But they still had this one last obstacle to hurdle.

It took Connors half an hour to find the type of a hotel he wanted. It had to be all Mexican during the week but a cheater's paradise on week-ends. He wanted to cross the international bridge on a Saturday night. This was Friday. And during the next twenty-four hours he and Eleana had a second transformation to make. They had to turn *Norte Americano* again.

He registered as *Señor* and *Señora* Seguros of Monterrey and asked for a room with a private bath. The first thing Eleana did was fill the tub. Connors went back down stairs to get a paper and look over the situation. There was noth-

ing about them or Attorney Santchez's murder in the Nuevo Laredo paper. It was dark by the time he reached the dingy customs houses on the south side of the bridge. There were a few pedestrians on the walk. In the west traffic lane, coming into Mexico, an Iowa car was having its baggage inspected and sealed. In the east lane, leaving Mexico, a California car was getting a cursory inspection. Just over the rise of the bridge he could see the American customs buildings. There were the usual uniformed officials of both countries. But walking up to the bridge had been foolish. There was no way of knowing if they could cross without being arrested and sent back to Uruapan until they made the actual attempt.

He picked up a bottle of rum, some coke, and some sandwiches and returned to the hotel. Eleana was still in the tub.

"You know, Ad," she told him seriously, "I think I've discovered the main difference between the inhabitants of the U.S. and a good share of the rest of the world."

Connors peeled off his shirt and ran water in the bowl. "You have?"

Eleana stretched luxuriantly in the tub, then pulled the stopper and reached for a towel. "Um hmm. We *like* to be clean."

"Speaking of being clean," Connors said, "how would you like to have me see if I can find a store open and buy you a complete new outfit?"

Eleana's eyes flecked with green as she stepped out of the tub. "Why the rush? Getting tired of me?" She flicked a few drops of water at him. "Or don't you like what I'm wearing?"

"I think it's cute," Connors said.

He felt the material and one thing led to another. It was midnight when he phoned the hotel desk and asked the clerk to send up another bottle of rum, more sandwiches, and some ice.

They still weren't in the clear. They still had their highest obstacle to hurdle. Trying to forget it they told each

other how clever they'd been and what General Estaban and the Uruapan police could do with Attorney Caesar A. Sanchez's body.

Leaning on one elbow, Eleana twisted a hairy mountain peak on Connors' chest. "Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, might stop a hole to keep the wind away."

Instead of giving him more of a lift the second bottle of rum acted as a depressant on Connors. He lay listening to the night noises on the street pass in review. He could hear the scuff of sandaled feet, the tap of high heels, the laughter of a drunken woman. For some reason the laughter seemed to symbolize all the sin and sorrow in the world. He wished he hadn't ordered the second bottle.

Eleana wasn't accustomed to drinking as heavily as she had. If it removed all her inhibitions, it also warped her judgment. She was sweet, then bitter, by turn.

"You're the nicest man I ever met, Ad."

Connors held her close.

"I don't know what I'd done if it hadn't been for you." Then Eleana thought of her mother, her uncle, and Allan. They were probably frantic by now, wondering what had happened to her. Even if she and Ad crossed the border safely, she still had the two lost weeks to explain. She wriggled out of Connors' arms. "On the other hand, if it hadn't been for you I wouldn't be in this mess. I'd still have my car and my clothes. And I wouldn't have anything to explain."

Eleana sat up on the bed and attempted to look haughty. "I'm sorry now I phoned you in Mexico City. So General Estaban took me. So what?"

Connors slapped her. "You're drunk, you slut. Shut up."

Eleana kned him in the stomach. "Don't you dare hit me. Just because I've spent two weeks with you is no reason you can treat me like the tramps you're used to sleeping with."

She attempted to claw his face and Connors wrestled her back on the bed and lay with one leg across her. Then, her flesh burning his, he tried to tell her how sorry he was he'd

slapped her. He knew now why he had. She was his love. He didn't want it to be this way. This wasn't just another affair as far as he was concerned. He'd fallen in love with a wide-eyed girl riding a shoddy white horse on a cheap Mexican carnival carousel. If and when Eleana walked out of his life nothing would ever be right again. The knowledge was ice in his stomach that all the rum in the world wouldn't melt.

He tried to explain how he felt and lost himself in words.

Glowering up at him, Eleana scoffed, "Ha. There's no such thing as love. It's all bio-chemical affinity." She used her father for example. "Mother's a beautiful, passionate, woman. I can't imagine her denying a thing to a man she loved. But did father appreciate that? No. When a new biological attraction became stronger than the old, pop went the weasel."

Connors protested no two men were alike.

The sadistic streak in Eleana came out. Drunk and angry as she was it amused her to hurt Connors. She begged to differ. To her personal knowledge all men were alike.

Connors put his head in his hands and wept.

Eleana added, "And I've known quite a few men."

She insisted on telling Connors about them. The first had been a boy in high school. The second a high school teacher. One a man she'd met at a dance. One a married man in Chicago. Once he had driven to St. Charles where she was spending the school Spring vacation with two other teachers. Unable to entertain him in the cottage she had suggested a walk in the moonlight. And because the ground was still wet with melted snow and their need of each other urgent he had taken her against a flag pole on a high bluff overlooking the river.

Connors buried his face in the hollow between her breasts. "Please, Eleana."

Eleana sobered. "I'm sorry, Ad. Really I am." She pressed

his face into her breasts. "I'm drunk or I wouldn't be talking this way."

She was suddenly lonely and frightened. Yesterday was dead. Tomorrow was still unborn. All they had was each other. All they knew was now.

After that, everything went.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The night was black and hot and filled with stars. As they approached the bridge, Connors saw a star fall. It could be an omen. The next few minutes would tell. He squeezed Eleana's arm. "Okay?"

Eleana took a deep breath. "Outside of a few butterflies."

They were moving with a boisterous crowd of returning midnight drunks, cheating couples, and tourists on short vacations who were eager to boast to their friends that they had been in Mexico. Even if he and Eleana were recognized, with foot traffic on the bridge as heavy as it was, Connors doubted the guards would shoot. Regardless, he meant to cross.

He made certain for the tenth time that there was nothing about them to attract attention. Eleana's suit was white and similar in cut to the one she'd left in the Ford. With her hair back up on her head and her eyes innocent and wide with interest, for all the night just past and the long trip up from Uruapan, she looked like an American virgin of Lourdes eager to return to her niche.

He'd thinned his mustache and purchased a pair of fawn colored slacks and a gabardine sport shirt to match.

He looked on ahead to the barrier. Two bored customs men were casually screening the returning crowd with their eyes and, from time to time, remarking a pair of pretty ankles or laughing at a drunk. They wouldn't give him any trouble. Then he saw the dapper little man with the hair-line mus-

tache. He had plainclothes man written all over his face. And he wasn't bored. His shrewd black eyes darted from face to face cataloguing and classifying their owners. If his eyes stripped a passing girl it was merely an attempt to ascertain her hair was naturally blond, her padding a part of her person, and she couldn't answer to the description—*Hair—brown . . . Eyes—gray . . . Weight—one hundred pounds . . . when last seen was wearing a chartreuse blouse and a gray nylon suit with gray snake skin shoes and purse to match.*

The end of Connors' spine tingled. They shouldn't have tried to cross at Laredo. They should have gotten to Juarez somehow. He hadn't been smart. He'd been dumb. Still they didn't dare turn back now. It would only attract more attention to them. His spine continuing to tingle, a hard knot in his groin, he walked on with the crowd, watching the plainclothes man. Only one thing gave him hope. The dapper little Mexican seemed to have a decided dislike for drunks. His shrewd eyes dismissed them with contempt.

Connors had taken a couple of quickies to nerve himself for the crossing. He was glad now he had. "We may be in for trouble," he warned Eleana. "I don't know. But when I bump into the little man with the mustache, giggle like you're drunk."

Eleana swallowed the lump in her throat. "Okay."

They were up to the customs men now. Connors hiccuped as he passed them. Then, two feet from the plainclothes man he let his right knee sag and breathed rum in the detective's face as he caught at the other man's coat, ostensibly to steady himself.

Beside him, Eleana giggled shrilly.

Still clinging to the detective, Connors grinned vacuously. "Scuse me, pal. One too many, I guess. Strong stuff, tequila, eh? I don't see how you Mexes stand it as a steady diet."

His face flaming, the officer pushed him erect and on his way. "Dog. Peeg. Dronk. Swine."

Connors staggered on, his neck aching from wanting to look back. Then a big uniformed man with a Texas drawl loomed large in his way and foot traffic diverted around himself and Eleana.

"What you sweatin' so for, chum?"

"He's drunk," Eleana told the Immigration man.

A Customs man came up to them. "Is he carrying a bottle, sister?"

"No, sir," Eleana said virtuously. Her drawl matched the Texan's. "He wanted to but I wouldn't let him. An' if I ever give him another Saturday night date, I hope I have my head examined."

The Immigration man nodded approval. "You're too nice a girl to mess around with a drunk. It's guys like him who give Americans a bad name. Where were you born, Miss?"

Eleana gave it the business. "Blue Mound, Missouri, sir." She looked at Ad with contempt. "An' he was born in Chicago."

Smiling, the big man waved them on.

Two hundred feet past the barrier, on American soil, Connors stopped and lighted a cigarette and offered the first puff to Eleana. "Thanks."

"Thank you," Eleana said.

She puffed on the cigarette and returned it and Connors wondered if she was thinking the same thing he was. This was the end of the line. She'd made that plain in Nuevo Laredo. He hailed a cab and helped her into it. "On into town," he told the driver. "No particular address." And now?" he asked Eleana.

Eleana rode looking out the window of the cab. "I'm leaving for Blue Mound on the first plane or train I can get."

"Just like that."

"Just like that." Eleana continued to look out the window. "I'll wire mother and Allan from Blue Mound. Uncle John will cover for me. He'll think of something. He'll tell them I've been sick and in Blue Mound all this time."

"Then you still intend to marry Lautenbach?"

"Why shouldn't I? Wouldn't you marry twenty million dollars if you could?"

Connors tried to think of something to say but none of the thousands of words he knew seemed to fit the situation. Silence filled the cab and built a wall between them. Then Connors thought of money and insisted she take half of what was left of the money Shad had wired.

Eleana protested but finally agreed. "But only as a loan."

Half came to two hundred and thirty dollars. Connors opened the big red purse he'd bought her in Nuevo Laredo to tuck the money in it and found it was stuffed with the carbon-smearred copies of KILL ME, MAÑANA and A CORPSE FOR THE BRIDE. The last he'd seen of them they'd been in the refuse basket in the hall of the Hotel Navidad. He asked, "How come?"

Eleana looked back out the window. "Let's say a souvenir. Something tied with blue."

Connors took her in his arms. "No, baby. You can't do this to me. You can't just walk out of my life."

Eleana refused to look at him. Her lips were compressed. The corners of her mouth turned down. "Not after all we've been to each other?" she drawled.

"It's true."

"It," Eleana countered, "was a biological incident." The cheek Connors could see was wet. Eleana's voice was deep. As deep as it had been the first night he'd seen her stripped and wanting him in an eight *peso* hotel room. "You go to hell, Ad Connors," she said. "And get out of my life. You hear me? Get out of my life."

Connors tilted her chin so she had to look at him. "But, Eleana, sweetheart—"

Her eyes were all gray now. "Why should I waste my life on you when I can marry the Lautenbach money?"

"You may be pregnant."

"I'll chance that."

"Besides you don't love Lautenbach."

Eleana attempted to push him away. "Love has nothing to do with this marriage. It's a business proposition. And I'm *not* going to teach school all my life."

"Then marry me," Connors pleaded. "I promise you, sweetheart. Someday I'll write something big."

Eleana wanted to hurt him. "Not from the samples I've seen."

"You kept the carbon copies."

"I explained that."

Connors tightened his arms and tried to kiss her. "Eleana. Baby. Please."

Eleana squirmed out of his arms and pounded at him with her fists. "You let me go. You keep your hands off me. And don't you ever touch me again."

The taxi man drove over to the curb and getting out opened the door. "What's the matter, Miss? Is this guy trying to get fresh?"

Her lips a thin line, Eleana said, "Yes."

"That," Connors said, "is a hot one. Just how do you get fresh with a dame you've slept with for two weeks?"

"Nix on that kind of talk," the cab driver said, coldly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, a big bruiser like you mauling a sweet little kid like that around." He looked at Eleana. "You want me to dump him here, Miss?"

"Yes," Eleana said. "Please."

The driver motioned Connors from the cab. "You heard the lady. Pile out."

Connors debated whether or not to hit him. Then he got out of the cab. "Okay. Good bye, Eleana."

From the darkness of the cab, her voice small, Eleana said, "Good bye, Ad."

Connors walked on without looking back. Eleana sounded like she was crying. He didn't give a damn if she was. He wished he was dead.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The bell boy opened the window and even high up as he was, Connors could hear the song of New York. There was a muted hum of traffic and a distant blare of horns spiced by a police whistle. In one of the buildings adjoining the hotel a workman was using a pneumatic hammer. The combined noises were orderly. They had rhyme and reason to them.

Connors raised his right palm shoulder high. "So help me."

Then, when the boy had gone, he called Shad Schaeffer's office. "This is Ad, Shad," he began the conversation. "And I'm home for good. No more Mexico for me."

Schaeffer sounded more startled than pleased to hear from him. "Where are you calling from, Ad?"

Connors told him. "I'm in 1512 at the Claremont. And look, Shad. To hell with trying to write the big theme. I can't write the sort of stuff the slick paper boys go for. Besides, it isn't worth the grief. So I'm a hack, I'm a hack. The man was dead. That's my story and I guess I'm stuck with it."

Connors expected Schaeffer to laugh. Instead, he said, "I wouldn't say that, Ad."

"What do you mean you wouldn't say it?"

"I mean I've sold the long one that the Post turned down."

"To whom?"

Shad said, "To Tanner Press. As a book."

Connors considered the information. It was as good if not better than a serial sale. Tanner Press hadn't published a book in five years that one of the major book clubs and Hollywood hadn't snapped up at fantastic figures before the galley proofs were dry.

He said, softly, "I love you, Shad."

The other man didn't enthuse. "You say you're in 1512?"

"That's right."

"Then stay there. I'll be right over."

Returning the receiver to its cradle, Connors walked into the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. For years he'd told himself he could write something beside detective and western yarns. Seemingly, he could. He'd sold a book to Tanner Press. He'd crashed into the circle of the elite. He was a serious novelist.

Still, he didn't look any different than he had before he'd called Shad. His hair was still flecked with gray. His face was still marked with the deep lines that hours of intense concentration, four packages of cigarettes a day, and uncounted gallons of coffee, had carved in it. Two weeks of lying in the Texas sun had deepened his tan. But Eleana still showed in his eyes.

So what? So he'd had an affair with a green-eyed nympholept, or nymphomaniac, or whatever the current term was. He could get along fine without her. Once his book had sold to the movies and he got out to Hollywood where glamor girls were as common as palm trees—. He stopped trying to kid himself. It wouldn't mean a thing. He was in love with a wide-eyed Eve.

Shad Schaeffer wasn't normally a profane man. He was now. "God almighty, Ad. What the goddam hell kind of a mess have you gotten yourself into?" His brief case under one arm, the agent stood with his back to the door breathing as hard as if he'd walked up the fifteen floors.

"What's eating you?" Connors asked.

His agent told him. "This man who's dead. This Caesar A. Sanchez. And this Mexican general you shot." Tossing his brief case on the bed Schaeffer filled a glass with ice water. "I spend ten years building you up. I nurse you through hangovers and the blues. I advance you money I can't afford to advance. I coddle, pamper, and encourage you. And now when I get a chance to cash in, just when I

peddle your first book, when we get our first real shot at the Cinderella money, you have to get in a mess." He gulped the glass of ice water. "What happened in Mexico?"

Connors fought a desire to be sick. The two weeks of loafing in the sun hadn't cured a thing. All they had done was incubate cocoons in his stomach. He was afraid to open his mouth for fear a flutter-by would wing out.

Shad sat on the bed beside him and laid a hand on his knee. "Come on, fellow. Tell me what happened. Just when I'm feeling fine for both of us. Just when I'm patting myself on the back for having had faith in you all these years, this man walked into the office."

"What man?"

"The man from the District Attorney's office. He asked if I knew where you were. I thought at first he was from the Internal Revenue Department and there was some beef about your income tax. So I told him why you had little or no income last year. I told him you'd gone to Mexico to write a serious book. Then he told me who he was and why he wanted you."

"Just what did he say?" Connors asked. "Just why does the District Attorney's office want me?"

Schaeffer lighted a cigarette and offered the package to Ad. "Because the Uruapan police, wherever in Mexico Uruapan is, have indicted you for the murder of this Sanchez. More, there's a second warrant issued in Mexico City charging you with assault with intentions to kill a General Estaban."

And there it was.

Schaeffer continued. "More. The New York police have been asked to pick you up and hold you. And as soon as you are in custody the Mexican police propose to send an officer to the Attorney General's office with the proper extradition papers."

The butterflies in Connors' stomach fluttered in unison. Such a possibility had been in the back of his mind all along

but he had refused to give it credence. He'd tried to convince himself that once he and Eleana had crossed the border everything would be fine, that General Estaban wouldn't bother to try to extradite them. He asked, "Did he, the man from the District Attorney's office, mention any name but mine? Did he mention an Eleana Hayes?"

Shad shook his head. "No. He didn't. Well? Don't just sit there. Tell me. Did you kill this Santchez?"

"No."

"You're not lying to me, Ad?"

"I'm not lying to you."

"Then why should a Mexican grand jury indict you for his murder?"

Connors told Schaeffer the whole story. The telling took the best part of an hour. When he finished, Shad said:

"Well I'll be a son-of-a-gun. And you had the crust to write a story about it. It was this Eleana's uncle who killed Santchez, eh?"

Connors shook his head. "Only in my story. Remember, I said I turned it around. It made a better story that way."

"Then who did kill him? Her father?"

"I don't know," Connors said. "Probably. He's the logical suspect from the viewpoint of motivation although the Mexican papers gave quite a play to a beautiful but heavily veiled *señora* who is reputed to have shared Santchez's bed during his last night on earth."

The agent hooted. "If the dame was heavily veiled, how do they know she was beautiful?" Schaeffer drew another glass of water for his ulcers. "No. I think we can forget the dame angle. That's just some reporter's verbal cheesecake. If the Mex dame this Donald Hayes ran away with was killed years ago, it couldn't have been her. And why would any other Mexican woman, or man for that matter, be wearing Donald Hayes' chain and locket? No. That's asking too much of coincidence. It was Eleana's mother's picture in the locket?"

"Eleana said it was."

"And her father left the United States twenty years ago, one step ahead of a murder warrant?"

"That was the story Eleana told me."

"He went to Mexico?"

Connors nodded. "Right. He went to Mexico. And for the last twenty years he's been sending fifty dollars a month through Attorney Sanchez to help support Eleana."

Shad asked, "Then why try to complicate the story? It was her father who killed Sanchez. Look at it this way, Ad. He was willing to help support her. But he didn't want even his daughter digging around in his grave. Twenty years is a long time. How do we know but what he's a big shot business man or politician down there now, too big to allow himself to be exposed?"

"That could be," Connors admitted.

Schaeffer patted his knee again. "That's the way it was. What had he to lose? You can only burn once for murder."

Talking had dissipated most of Connors' tension. He lay back on the bed and howled. Shad asked what he was laughing at and Connors said, "That chromo. If I were to use it in a yarn you'd pencil it out so fast the lead would smoke."

"That could be, son," Schaeffer admitted. "I don't pretend to be a writer. You write them and I'll sell them." He opened his brief case and took out a Tanner Press contract prepared in quadruplicate. "How does that look to you?"

Connors skimmed through one of the contracts. "Swell. There's only one fly in the golden glitter. I can't sign it."

Schaeffer uncapped his fountain pen. "Why not?"

"Because of that pick-up and hold request. I imagine you told the lad from the District Attorney's office that you'd try to get in touch with me?"

"I may have intimated as much."

"Then if I sign these and you don't turn me in, you're guilty, technically at least, of aiding and abetting a killer."

Schaeffer handed Connors his pen. "For my cut of a Tanner Press contract, I'll take that chance. Sign on the second line, please. On all four contracts. Besides you didn't kill the guy."

Connors signed the four contracts. "That remains to be proven. And if extradition is granted and I'm taken back to Uruapan I won't have a Republican's chance in South Carolina." He blew on his signatures to dry them. "Well, anyway, it was nice to know I could do it."

Schaeffer scoffed, "Don't be silly, Ad. We'll get the best lawyer in New York busy on this right away. In a case like this who is empowered to grant extradition?"

"I don't know," Connors admitted. "In extradition between states it's up to the governor of the state to which application is made. But with an international boundary line involved, I imagine the Mexican authorities would have to apply to the United States Attorney General. And he, in turn, will request the governor of this state to act. But whether the case would come up before a state or federal judge, I haven't the least idea."

"Fine," Schaeffer said. "Fine." His agile mind was already figuring angles. "So the extradition proceedings come up before either a state or federal judge. All we have to do is have this Eleana Hayes tell her story and no state or federal judge would grant extradition. Now I know the facts, I'm glad it happened. It will make grand publicity for the book. And you can bet the hundred grand or so the contract you just signed will bring you, that the Tanner Press public relations boys will see to it that your trial is spread all over the front page of every newspaper in the United States. This Hayes girl is in New York?"

"No. In Blue Mound, Missouri."

Smiling now, Schaeffer patted Connors' knee a third time. "Then before I contact the District Attorney's office, before we even engage a lawyer, you grab a plane for Blue Mound

and tell her what has happened." His smile faded slowly. "You won't have any trouble getting her to tell her story, will you, Ad?"

Connors lighted a cigarette and drew the smoke deep into his lungs before replying. "Well, let's put it this way."

"What way?"

"From Eleana's point of view. If you were a twenty-three-year-old Chicago school teacher, technically a virgin, and engaged to marry twenty million dollars—"

"Yes—?"

"Just how pleased would you be about having the fact spread over every newspaper front page in the country that you had just spent a delightful, if somewhat harassed and drunken, two week Mexican assignation with an unknown but virile pulp writer who is accused of murdering a respectable Mexican attorney who, alive, very possibly was in a position to prove that your wanted-for-murder father was never legally married to your mother?"

Shad Schaeffer sighed. "Yes. I see what you mean."

CHAPTER NINE

Blue Mound was the first country town of its type that Connors had ever seen. It didn't look like a country town. It looked more like a segment chiseled out of Chicago or New York. The station was new and modern. Enroute to the hotel the late-model Yellow Cab in which he was riding passed a good sized movie house, a kosher delicatessen, a bowling alley, two Super Markets, a half dozen smart women's shops, two beauty salons, three cocktail bars, a chop suey palace, and a bank that could have passed for the twin of an uptown Chase National branch.

The cab driver was sixty years old but wearing a loud sports jacket and his white mustache was waxed in two

points that extended a half inch from each corner of his mouth. Connors asked him if he knew John Hayes.

"Christ, yes," the driver said. "John owns half the town. He owns this cab, for that matter. And a damn nice guy he is." The driver glanced up at his rear vision mirror. "Who you out front for, chum?"

"I beg your pardon?" Connors puzzled.

The old man shrugged. "My mistake. Forget it. You looked like an advance man to me. Just down for the wedding, eh?"

"Whose wedding?"

The old man's obvious scorn made Connors feel slightly stupid. "Jeez. Don't you ever read *Variety* or the *Billboard*? Eleana's wedding, of course. She's marrying the Lautenbach money. It was going to be next Fall. But it was moved up to next week. On account of they were so much in love, I suppose."

The hotel was on a par with the rest of the town. The desk clerk was as old, if not older, than the cab driver but his hair was dyed a blue-black and he was wearing a smartly cut double breasted white linen suit that built up his frail shoulders. He looked like an old stock actor or vaudeville straight man.

"A room with bath. Yes, sir."

Connors signed his own name on the registry card. The lawyer he and Shad had consulted had been emphatic on that point. The lawyer wanted nothing in the record that could be construed as unlawful flight to avoid prosecution.

The clerk dropped the card into a file, then slipped it out again and did a double take. His aged eyes were bright with interest. "Not *the* Ad Connors who writes detective stories?"

Connors admitted his identity and the old man insisted on shaking hands.

"This is indeed a pleasure. And an honor. Detective stories are my favorite reading. And you are my favorite author."

He proved it by naming the titles of stories Connors had forgotten he'd written. It was obvious the aged clerk wondered what had brought Connors to Blue Mound but he was too much of a gentleman to ask. Instead, he tapped a bell on the desk and a younger edition of Bull Montana bobbed across the small lobby. Then, seeing Connors' baffled look, he laughed. "Blue Mound is a little different than most country towns you've been in, eh, Mr. Connors?"

"Yes," Connors admitted. "It is. How come?"

The clerk was pleased to inform him. "It goes back twenty years, Mr. Connors. To the days when the Haves Brothers' Circus wintered here. The climate is mild. The hunting and fishing good. A good many of the animal men, and quite a few performers, purchased winter homes here for that reason. Then when the depression of the early thirties hit and the circus folded, we were unable to sell out or get out. During the depression other circus, carnival, and tent show people joined us. At least they could eat in Blue Mound and get jobs of a sort, farming, breaking mules, working in the cob pipe factory. With better times we went back to the fair dates, the big tops, and the midways. But a good many of us had come to consider Blue Mound our home. We returned to winter, buy even more homes, and invest our profits in various local businesses and enterprises until, as of today, three-fourths of the merchants and residents of Blue Mound have at some time or other in their lives been connected with one or another branch of the entertainment world."

He laughed. "And as most of us, most of our lives, have been rather scornful of 'towners' and small towns, when we did take root, we've tried to make Blue Mound the biggest small town in the state."

"I see," Connors said. "And you own this hotel?"

The old man smoothed the fit of his coat. "No. I'm one of the boys who forgot to put it away. Just a statement. No regrets." He looked back down the years and his faded blue eyes twinkled. "I had a hell of a time."

The room was on the second floor. With the exception of the window opening onto a fire escape platform instead of a bird's eye view of Broadway it was on a par with the room Connors had had at the Claremont. He tipped the punch-drunk bellboy then got busy with the phone book. There was only one Hayes listed. He was listed as having both a residential and a business phone. Connors called the residential number and a woman answered.

"The John Hayes' residence."

"Eleana?"

The woman laughed. "No. This is Celeste, her mother. To whom am I speaking?"

Connors debated giving his name. "My name is Ad Connors."

Eleana's mother was polite but vague. "Oh."

It was obvious Eleana hadn't told her about him. "Might I speak to Eleana, please?"

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Connors," Eleana's mother said. "But Eleana is not here at the moment. She and Allan drove out somewhere, I believe. Could I take a message for her?"

Connors' stomach did a slow turn. He'd promised himself he wouldn't allow Eleana or anything she did to upset him. But he hadn't figured on Allan Lautenbach being in Blue Mound. He didn't want to cause Eleana any trouble. He had too much pride to force himself on any woman. But neither did he intend to be sent back to Mexico in defense of a virginity that, by her own admission was lost in a high school locker room. "N-no. I'm afraid not," he said.

"Then could I have her call you, Mr. Connors?"

"That," Connors said, "would be very kind of you, Mrs. Hayes."

"And where shall I have her call?"

Connors said he was at the hotel and gave Eleana's mother the number of his room. She said she would have Eleana call him as soon as she came in and hung up.

Connors found the bottle in his bag and bought himself a

drink. Then he waited two hours for Eleana to call. The room was in the back of the hotel. The afternoon sun beat in the window. There was nothing to look at but the shimmering heat waves rising from the fire escape landing, a high board fence, and the back of a livery stable that had been turned into a garage.

He took off his coat, then his shirt. Then he stripped down to his shorts. The sun dipping to the horizon caught on fire and burned out. The mechanics in the garage put away their tools and rolled down the big back door. With the coming of night a hot black curtain dropped over the window and a pair of amorous cats began to arch their backs along the fence.

They made Connors think of Guadalajara. He phoned the Hayes' residence again. A man answered the phone this time. He said Eleana had not returned. Neither she nor her mother was in. Yes. There was a message on the phone pad asking Eleana to phone a Mr. Connors in Room 205 at the hotel.

Connors asked him if he was John Hayes.

"I am," the man said, and hung up.

Connors waited a few more minutes. Then he put on the white summer suit he'd hung in the closet and ate at the Chinese restaurant. The meal was excellent but did nothing to lighten his mood.

At any angle from which he viewed the affair, it was a mess. Kupperman, the lawyer, was reputed to be a top man in his line. But Kupperman admitted he'd never handled a similar case. He *thought* because of Connors' previous good record, both civilian and army, that if Connors could get a notarized deposition from Eleana as to the true facts in the case, plus a signed statement from the local sheriff or county attorney as to her reputation for veracity, any judge sitting on the case would be justified in denying extradition. On the other hand the judge might well, and probably would, demand that Eleana appear at the hearing in person. In that

case, if Eleana refused to testify for fear of jeopardizing her intended marriage to Lautenbach, Kupperman didn't know what they could do. Connors knew what he intended to do. He was going to blow the whole thing wide open no matter who got hurt.

He'd walked almost back to the hotel when he realized he was being followed. The man stopped when he stopped, moved on when he did, being careful never to close the gap between them or come close enough for Connors to see his face. All Connors could see was that the man was tall and broad shouldered. But there could be no possible doubt. The man was following him.

Connors walked into the hotel lobby. Eleana still hadn't called. There was a new, young clerk on the desk. The old clerk was reading a copy of *Variety* in the lobby. He was pleased when Connors sat down beside him.

"Yes," he said in answer to Connors' question. "I knew Donald Hayes well. I worked for Don three seasons. Two as a spieler for the side show. The last one as ringmaster."

"Describe him," Connors said.

"He was tall. Broad shouldered. Good looking. The type of man women go crazy about."

Connors took his cigarettes from the pocket of his white Palm Beach coat and offered one to the old man. The theory that was building in his mind was far fetched but possible. The whole affair was proof that stranger things happen in real life than he had ever been able to foist on an editor. After a lapse of twenty years few of the people Donald Hayes had known, with the exception of his wife and brother, would be apt to recognize him. And even if he was recognized show people were notoriously loyal to their own.

Hayes seemingly had a high regard for his daughter. What if after killing Santchez to conceal his new identity, or for some reason unknown, he had returned to Blue Mound to watch Eleana marry the Lautenbach money? Connors sucked hard at his cigarette. In that case he would have

more to deal with in Blue Mound than Eleana's possible refusal to make a deposition.

"Just why," the old desk clerk asked, "are you interested in Donald Hayes, Mr. Connors?"

Connors lied. "I'm not. That is, as a man. But I hear there is still a twenty-year-old murder warrant out on him."

Pleased by his own sagacity, the clerk slapped his bony knee. "I knew it. I knew it as soon as I recognized you. You've come to Blue Mound to write a detective novel based on the facts in the Hayes' case. And there's a story in Don. A good one. I've often wondered why one of your boys didn't write it. How much of the story do you know?"

He continued before Connors could answer. "Anything you don't know, Jimmy Thompson and I can tell you."

Connors asked who Thompson was.

The clerk said Thompson was the local sheriff.

"And he was sheriff when it happened?"

"No. Just a deputy. But old Sheriff Miles was sickly and Jimmy did most of his work." The old man was lonely. He was pleased to have an audience. He winked at Connors. "Look. Why not come up to my room and we'll have a drink or two while I tell you what I know of the story?"

Connors had heard the story from Eleana. He had no desire to hear it again. He didn't want a drink. It was fairly cool in the lobby. He had no doubt the clerk's room would be as hot as his own. He said, "I'd like to. Believe me. But I'm waiting for a phone call."

The old man took it from there. Standing up he called to the clerk at the desk. "When Mr. Connors' call comes in, put it through to my room, Jack."

The clerk said, "Sure thing, Mr. MacMillan."

Connors followed the old man up the stairs. It was as good a way to kill time as any. MacMillan's room was on the second floor in front, four rooms down from 205. There was a battered wardrobe trunk in one corner of the room. The old man took a quarter-filled bottle and two shot glasses out of

one of the drawers of the trunk and apologized for there not being more. He wanted to go out and buy another bottle but Connors said:

"Forget it. If we run short, there's another bottle on my dresser."

Some of the day's heat had dissipated. The night wind ruffling the drapes on the window was cool. The chair was comfortable. The whiskey was good. MacMillan's version of the yarn was much the same as Eleana's but he knew more of the details. He had always considered Don Hayes a fine man.

MacMillan spread his hands in apology. "After all, Mr. Connors, Don isn't the only man in the world who ever jumped his trolley over a woman. History is filled with them. Samson, David, Paris, Marc Antony, Lord Essex, Louis XV, Eddie Windsor. It might be well to keep that in mind when you're writing the story."

"I'll do that," Connors promised.

MacMillan looked back twenty years. "Don was a right guy, always good for a touch or a laugh. He was also a smart circus man. And if he hadn't chumped off over Tamara the money he mortgaged the show for would have pulled us through. Sure Tamara was pretty. But so was Celeste in those days."

His eyes lighted at the memory. "I remember once when we were making a long jump and the canvas boys struck the side walls of Celeste's dressing tent a little earlier than usual. She'd just stepped out of her ring costume and the drop of the canvas caught her without a stitch on. I can still see her standing there in the work light looking like an ivory statue rising out of a pool of flame."

Connors thought of Eleana in the flick on and off of the Hotel Navidad sign and his groin ached for wanting her.

MacMillan chuckled. "But even with a bunch of us standing there gaping at her like yokels, was Celeste embarrassed? She was not. She just smiled that superior, bitchy smile of a

woman who knows she has what it takes to set a man on fire. Then she ran her hands over her breasts and down over her hips and asked in that French accent of hers, 'You like?'

"What happened then?" Connors asked.

MacMillan laughed. "Don came along and gave the canvas boss hell. He also blacked one of Celeste's eyes for being such a little bitch." MacMillan was silent a moment. Then he sighed. "No. I don't know what got into Don with all that loveliness at home. It must have been just one of those things. Hell. I saw Don myself the night he came home from California and he acted perfectly normal."

Connors leaned forward in his chair. "Where was this? I mean where did you see him?"

MacMillan said, "On the station platform. We didn't expect him for another week but he came in on the two o'clock milk train. He wasn't in much of a mood to shoot the breeze but I thought at the time he was just eager to get home. In fact it wasn't until I went into the cook house for breakfast the next morning that I learned what had happened."

"But you did talk to him?"

"For a few minutes. I asked if he'd been able to mortgage the show. He said he had and seemed very pleased about it. As I recall, he told me, 'With what I have in the money belt, Mac, we're going to pull through in fine shape.'"

"He had the mortgage money in cash?"

"I imagine so. Most circus business involves cash transactions. At least it did in those days."

"Then what?" Connors asked.

"Then Don walked off down the road whistling." MacMillan refilled their glasses. "I mean it, Mr. Connors. You could have knocked me over with the breeze from a tent stake when I learned what had happened."

Connors sipped his drink. "You knew, that is the circus knew, Hayes was carrying on with this Tamara?"

The old man considered the question. "Speaking for myself, I'd say no. Oh, Don kidded with Tamara a lot and

Tamara kidded back." MacMillan shrugged. "But when a man climbs into another man's saddle, unless he's a complete damn fool, which Don wasn't, he's usually fairly careful where he mounts the mare."

"And how long after you saw Hayes was it when he killed this Mexican high-rope walker's husband and skipped with her and the money?"

"Sometime between then and morning." MacMillan defended Hayes. "And I don't think the killing was premeditated. I imagine Don hoped to eat his regular meals and still nibble at his cake from time to time but Pablo caught them cheating and Don was forced to kill him. Then, with a dead man on his hands, all he could do was take a powder."

"Pablo was Tamara's husband?"

"That's right." MacMillan snuffed his cigarette. "And if you want your yarn to be strictly accurate, Tamara wasn't a Mex. She was Gypsy."

Connors sat up in his chair. "She was what?"

"She was Gypsy. Along with walking the high wire she ran a mitt camp on the midway."

Connors considered the information. He'd wondered about the name Tamara. "You say she was pretty?"

MacMillan kissed the tips of his fingers to the ceiling. "Mmm."

"And married."

"Very much so."

"What was her husband like?"

"He was a Mexican Gypsy. A big man, six feet two or three, weighing maybe two-twenty. We had to build a special coffin. Then we had to squeeze him in. Pablo was a good looking devil, too." The old man grinned. "Not disparaging Don, understand. But I wondered at the time what he could give Tamara she wasn't getting at home."

"And you're sure Tamara was Gypsy?" Connors asked.

"I'm positive. She used to boast her blood was pure Tsigani. Why?"

The room was suddenly hot again. Connors' shirt collar was too tight. He asked the question that was bothering him. "Look, Mac. You were in show business a long time. You must have known a lot of Gypsies."

"I have. Hundreds of them."

Connors leaned forward in his chair. "Then tell me this. Think back. How many Gypsy women have you slept with? How many Gypsy women have you known who ran away with another man? How many Gypsy women have you ever met who would let any man but their husbands touch them?"

The old man thought a long moment. Then he shook his head. "None. Chastity is a fetish with them. Gypsy women will lie and steal and raise hell. They'll laugh at a dirty joke and kid and drink with you. But you slip a hand between their knees or cup a titty and they'll go for a knife and try to cut your heart out." He was silent another long moment. "Hmm. Yes. I see what you mean. Funny I never thought of that before."

MacMillan looked at the bottle. It was empty.

"I'll get the one in my room," Connors said. He got to his feet as the phone rang.

MacMillan answered the phone and handed Connors the receiver. "It's your call."

Connors gave him his room key. "The bottle's on my dresser." The old man straightened the set of his coat and left the room. Connors spoke into the phone. "Eleana?"

She sounded both angry and frightened. "Yes. Eleana. What are you doing in Blue Mound?"

The phone was on a table near the door. Connors glanced out into the hall to make certain MacMillan wasn't listening. The old man was standing in front of Room 205, inserting the key in the door. Connors spoke into the phone again. "Something's come up we didn't expect. I have to see you. Now. Tonight. As soon as possible."

"I won't see you," Eleana said fiercely. "I told you to get out of my life."

Connors cut short a hot retort as a dull double roar filled the hall. When he looked into the hall again, MacMillan was no longer standing in front of Room 205. The door swung open into the unlighted room and the blast had hurled MacMillan against the opposite wall. The set of his smart white coat was no longer important to him. The front of it was sodden with blood. As Connors watched, the old man's knees gave away and he pitched forward on his face.

Other doors along the hall opened. A fat man said, "Gee-Sus KeeRist." The frightened face of the youthful desk clerk rose over the head of the stairs. Somewhere a woman was screaming.

Then Connors realized the screams were coming from the receiver in his hand and returned it to his ear.

"Ad," Eleana screamed. "What's happened?"

He told her. "Someone just tried to kill me."

CHAPTER TEN

There was, Connors thought, something indecent about death. Alive the old man had known a measure of pride and privacy. His past, his future hopes, his mind, his body, were his own. Now he was so much cooling flesh, an inanimate, inarticulate object of morbid and official curiosity. Dust returned to the test tube.

There was no doubt MacMillan was dead. His frail body had been blown almost in two. Connors hung up on Eleana's demand for details and was, mildly, surprised to find his hands were shaking so badly he had to strike three matches before he could light a cigarette.

The silence in the hall deepened, then was broken by a blue-bottle fly that appeared out of nowhere and began to

buzz noisily. A moment later the excited voice of the desk clerk informed someone in the lobby, "It's old man MacMillan, sheriff. Someone blew him in two with a double-barreled shotgun."

A man in his late fifties flanked by a younger man appeared at the stairhead and walked down the hall. Both men wore fawn-colored riding pants with shirts to match, expensive white sombreros, and silver-studded gun belts.

"I'm Sheriff Thompson," the older man announced. "Who saw it happen?"

No one answered him.

He looked from the body to the open door of Room 205. Then stepping over the spreading pool of blood he entered the room and switched on the light. Whoever had fired the two shots hadn't bothered to take the gun with him. It lay where it had been dropped near the window.

The younger man asked if he should check the fire-escape and the yard.

"Do that, Macey," Thompson said. He picked up the shotgun and laid it on the bed. Then he returned to the door. "Which one of you men is checked into this room?"

"I am." Connors said.

"What's your name?"

"Ad Connors."

Sheriff Thompson pushed his hat back on his head. "Oh, yes. You're that detective story writer Mac was all steamed up about. Kinda bumped into the real thing, didn't you?"

"So it would seem."

A tall thin man wearing a crumpled seersucker suit pushed through the group in the hall and set the black bag he was carrying beside the body. "Old Mac, eh? Who shot him, Jimmy?"

Thompson shook his head. "I just got here." He looked at Connors. "Mind answering a few questions, Mr. Connors?"

"Not at all," Connors said.

"Then suppose you start by telling us what you're doing in Mac's room and what he was doing in yours."

Connors told him the truth. "We were talking and we ran out of whiskey. I offered to get the bottle in my room but just then I got a phone call and MacMillan went for the bottle."

The thin man squatted down beside the corpse. "Poor guy. He never knew what hit him."

The youthful deputy returned to report the killer had scuffed a few flakes of rust from the fire-escape but no one had seen him come or go and there were no footprints in the yard.

Sheriff Thompson rolled a cigarette. "Mind telling me who called you on Mac's phone, Mr. Connors?"

The fly continued to buzz noisily. Connors wished someone would swat it. He didn't want to involve Eleana in this but the clerk would tell if he didn't. "Why, no. It was Miss Hayes."

"That's right," the clerk said. "Miss Hayes called maybe ten or fifteen minutes after they came upstairs and I put the call through to Mac's room."

Thompson licked the cigarette he'd rolled. "Down for the wedding, Mr. Connors?"

"No. Not exactly."

"And just what were you and Mac talking about? Anything that might help us?"

The youthful clerk answered before Connors could. "Just before they came upstairs I heard Mac say, 'I knew it. I knew it as soon as I recognized you. You've come to Blue Mound to write a detective novel on the facts in the Hayes' case.'"

Still squatted beside the body, Doc Hanson said, "Oh, oh. John isn't going to like that."

"No," Sheriff Thompson agreed. "Especially at this time. But I doubt if John would try to stuff the family skeleton back in the closet via the shotgun route." He was suddenly

impatient. "All right, Mr. Connors. We've gone through the amenities. Let's get down to business. Who here in Blue Mound hates your guts badly enough to want to blow them out?"

Stalling for time, Connors said, "I don't know that anyone hates me that much." He wanted to talk to Eleana before he told any part of his story. "Certainly no one in Blue Mound. I've only been in town four hours."

Thompson lighted his cigarette. "What color is your suit?"

"White."

"What color suit was Mac wearing?"

"White."

"How tall would you say he was?"

"Six feet."

"How tall are you?"

"Six feet."

"And Mac's hair was what color?"

"Black."

"That's right. The same color as yours, Mr. Connors. And he was killed opening the door of whose room?"

"My room."

"By someone who was waiting in there for you to open the door." Thompson's lean face colored. "Now listen to me, son. I know you're a big shot. Mac told me you were. But stop trying to treat me like a rube sheriff in a trick hat. The gun belt and pants go with the job. But this isn't New York or Chicago. This is Blue Mound, Missouri. And murders don't grow on rose bushes here. It's been twenty years since anyone could possibly have any reason for wanting to kill Mac. Now start talking before I begin not to like you. Who hates you enough to want to kill you?"

Connors shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't help you, sheriff. I'm afraid I'll have to stand on what I've already said."

"Then in that case," Thompson countered, "I'm afraid I'll have to offer you the hospitality of the local pokey."

"On what charge?"

"A perfectly legal one. As a material witness. And I'll see to it that bail is set so high you won't get out until you do talk."

Macey got Connors' straw hat from MacMillan's room and put it on his head. "Go ahead now. Like a nice fellow. Or do you want I should smack you one?"

Shrugging, Connors preceded Sheriff Thompson down the stairs and into the lobby. The lobby was filled with people. More were waiting on the walk in front of the hotel. Thompson propelled him across the walk and started to cross the street only to find his way blocked by a black convertible Cadillac.

"Just one minute, sheriff."

Connors knew the man as soon as he saw him. He was both tall and broad shouldered. His grizzled hair had once been sandy. His eyes were deep set and burned with the inner fire of a fanatic. His drawl was even more pronounced than Eleana's. He could only be her uncle, John Hayes.

Wearing an off-the-shoulder evening gown that matched her eyes, Eleana slid into the seat her uncle had just vacated and held out her hand to Connors. "Hello, Ad. So glad you could come. So nice to see you."

Her voice was friendly but reserved. Connors took his cue from her. "I'm glad to be here, Eleana. But it seems I've run into a little trouble."

Standing beside the car, John Hayes said, "Yes. About that. Eleana told me she heard shots while she was speaking with Mr. Connors on the phone. So we drove into town immediately. Just what happened, sheriff?"

Sheriff Thompson explained what he knew of the story. Hayes listened nodding sagely from time to time. Then when Thompson had finished, he said, "I see. And it is your idea to jail Mr. Connors as a material witness?"

"I thought it would keep him on tap."

"An excellent idea, sheriff." John Hayes smiled thinly. "But a little rough on Mr. Connors. At my niece's invitation

he arrives in Blue Mound to attend a wedding and winds up back of bars. Here's a counter suggestion, sheriff. Why not allow us to take Mr. Connors out to the house? I'll give you my personal word he won't leave town until you are convinced he can be of no further aid to you in your investigation of this affair."

God, Connors thought, has spoken. Eleana had been truthful about one thing. Her Uncle John was the local poohbah.

Without waiting for Thompson to answer, Eleana slid over again and opened the other door of the car. "Slip in here beside me, Ad."

Connors hesitated. It could be he would be safer in the Blue Mound jail than he would be as a guest of John Hayes.

Hayes asked, "Well?" a bit impatiently.

"I guess that will be all right, Mr. Hayes," Thompson said. The back of his neck crimson he turned and returned to the hotel.

Hayes got in the car and drove on down the street.

"Someday," Eleana said, "you're going to push Thompson too far."

Connors rode trying to make up his mind whether he loved or hated Eleana. The pressure of her thigh was torture. He wished her bare shoulders weren't so close.

A mile out of town, Hayes swung the convertible in between two stone gate posts. Then driving onto the shoulder of the private road he stopped the car. "All right. Let's have it, young man. Why have you come to Blue Mound? And what's this nonsense about someone trying to kill you?"

Connors looked at Eleana.

She made a gesture of distaste. "It's all right. You can talk. Uncle John knows all about Mexico. I had to tell him so he could help me think up a plausible story to tell mother and Allan."

John Hayes' voice was as thin as his lips. "And let's under-

stand each other, young man. I appreciate what you did for Eleana. But I'll stand for no nonsense from anyone."

"So I observe," Connors said.

Hayes ignored the flippancy. "In my opinion the whole affair could have been handled much differently. There was no excuse for either you or Eleana to give away to your carnal appetites. But feeling as I do about her, I can't and won't allow her to suffer for her foolishness. If this is a matter of blackmail, come to the point. How much money do you have in mind?"

"There's no money involved," Connors said.

"Then why did you come to Blue Mound?"

Connors told him. "Because it seems our little Mexican interlude didn't end at the border. A jury in Uruapan has indicted me for the murder of Attorney Sanchez and the Mexican authorities have requested that I be arrested and confined pending extradition proceedings."

Eleana gasped. "Oh, no."

"Oh, yes," Connors said.

A car bound into Blue Mound swept the convertible with its headlights and the night seemed darker when it had passed.

Hayes said, "I see. Hmm. That does complicate matters. And just what is it you want of Eleana?"

"The truth." Connors lighted a cigarette and offered first puff to Eleana. "My lawyer says if Eleana will make a deposition as to what really happened in Mexico City and in Uruapan he doesn't think a judge will grant extradition."

"She wouldn't have to go into court?"

"That I don't know and can't promise. If the judge who hears the proceedings refuses to accept the deposition she'll have to appear in person."

Eleana puffed the cigarette to a red glow. "I absolutely refuse. I won't go into court and admit I'm the kind of a little bitch who would—well, do what I did do."

"Eleana. Please," John Hayes said. He shook his head. "No, Mr. Connors. Either such a deposition as you propose or Eleana appearing in court to testify for you is impossible. To do so she would have to admit two weeks of carnal intimacy with practically a total stranger. And I won't allow her to do that. It would break her mother's heart. Besides, I have my position in the community to think of."

Connors opened the car door. "To hell with your position."

Eleana caught at his arm. "No. Wait, Ad. What are you going to do?"

He said, "I'm going back into town and ask Sheriff Thompson to lock me up. Then I'm going to ask him to wire the New York authorities and blow this whole thing wide open."

"No," Hayes said. "You can't do that."

"Why can't I?"

"I'll lie," Eleana said. "I'll lie my head off. If you make me go into court I'll testify against you."

Hayes said, sharply, "Keep quiet. You're being hysterical, Eleana." He answered Connors. "You can't because I won't allow you to. Eleana has told me the whole story, including a vivid description of the locket and chain you saw in this dead lawyer's hand. And it was Don's locket beyond question. Celeste bought it for him shortly before he left for California. Don't you see what will happen if Eleana is forced to go into court. Not only will her own reputation be destroyed but her father will be stamped—"

Connors finished the sentence for him. "As a man who has committed murder on both sides of the border."

"That's one way of putting it."

"So to protect a double killer I'm to be made a sacrificial goat."

Hayes protested, "No. Nothing like that. Believe me, Mr. Connors. We'll work this out some way."

"How?"

"I don't know."

Connors found the ashtray on the dashboard and snuffed the cigarette he was smoking. How long has it been since you've seen your brother, Mr. Hayes?"

"Approximately twenty years."

"You're positive of that?"

"I am."

"But you'd recognize him if you saw him?"

"Of course I would."

"And he isn't in Blue Mound now?"

"Not to the best of my knowledge."

"What are you getting at, Ad?" Eleana asked. "What makes you think father might be in Blue Mound?"

"MacMillan," Connors said. "Because of the attempt on my life. The killer mistook MacMillan for me."

Eleana took a deep breath and drawled, "I don't believe it."

"Because you don't want to believe it." Connors tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Have I ever lied to you, Eleana?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then believe me. Before I allow myself to be extradited and stood up against some bullet-pocked wall as a sop to General Estaban's unrequited libido, I'm going to bring this whole thing out in the open. Your father is a smart man. He must be. Being smart, he knows what my defense will be. He also knows with me dead and out of the way the Mexican authorities will drop the whole affair and the name of Señor Donald Hayes need never be mentioned.

Eleana began to cry softly. "I can't believe that of my father."

John Hayes' voice was bleak. "You never knew your father. And a man capable of doing what Don did to Celeste and myself is capable of doing anything. But tell me this, Mr. Connors. Have you anything but theory to support your

supposition it was my brother who shot MacMillan, mistaking him for you?"

Connors said, "No. Nothing except for the fact a tall, broad shouldered man whose face I was unable to see followed me from the restaurant to the hotel."

"And you have no known enemies who might have followed you to Blue Mound?"

"None."

Hayes broke the long silence that followed by sighing. "Well, the decision is yours, Mr. Connors. Viewed in the light in which you put it, it's possible my brother is in Blue Mound. Attempting another murder to conceal the two he has already committed is the bold sort of a thing of which Don would be capable. Naturally he wouldn't dare to show himself to either myself or Celeste."

John Hayes studied the night enveloping the car. "I'd hoped we'd finished with Don these many years. Now this." He started the car. "Well, what must be faced, must be faced. So, if you wish, I'll drive you back to town. There you may do as you please as to informing Sheriff Thompson of your suspicions. You'll find him a capable officer, if somewhat subservient to my wishes."

Connors asked, "And the alternative?"

"Continue on to the house as my guest and we'll discuss this at greater length."

Eleana said, quickly, "But not in front of mother or Alan."

Connors flipped a mental coin. He had the same feeling he'd known in Uruapan, that he was wrestling with shadows. Beside him Eleana's perfume and the gleam of the bare shoulders he'd kissed added to the tissue of unreality with which the whole fabric of the affair had been interwoven from the start. He hesitated. "Well—"

Eleana laid her hand on his arm. "Please come to the house, Ad."

He shrugged. "Okay. Let's go on to the house."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was the sort of a house a former showman with money might build. The living room was huge, mostly natural field stone and rough-hewn timber beams. The room was two stories high. A five foot wide balcony, off which the sleeping rooms opened framed it on three sides. On the fourth side a great stone fireplace rose unimpeded to the shadowy, cathedral ceiling. The waxed wide-board floor was bare except where it was splashed with colorful Navajo rugs, any one of which would have been too large for the average living room.

The out-jutting balcony formed a natural gallery and Hayes had used the over-hang to bizarre advantage. The space under it was filled with mementoes of the circus he'd once owned.

The walls under the over-hang were papered with faded one and two and three-sheets, playbills, throw-away, dodgers, all bearing the legend HAYES BROTHERS' CIRCUS and eulogizing its attractions. Between them hung framed professional pictures of now aged, or long dead, aerial artists, actors, spielers, bull men, cat men, kinkers, fire-eaters, clowns, dancing girls, riders, musicians, freaks. In front of them stood gilded wagon wheels and chariot tongues. There was even a moth-eaten lion and a stuffed baby elephant labeled—Happy.

The entire east wall was devoted to colored lithographs and pictures of Eleana's mother. There were pictures of her pirouetting on the back of a white horse, riding one horse and driving six, diving through a hoop of flame. She came into the room with John Hayes as Connors was looking at her pictures.

At forty-two the former equestrienne was still beautiful. Her face was unlined and animated. Her chin and throat

muscles were firm. Her uncorseted figure was as slim as Eleana's. She had even more inner fire than Eleana. How any man in his right mind could have deserted a twenty year younger Celeste was beyond Connors' comprehension. Except for the silver streak time and tragedy had brushed into her black hair, and her work-worn hands, Celeste Hayes could pass as her daughter's sister.

Eleana took a deep breath. "This is Ad Connors, mother. An old friend from Chicago who's come down for the wedding."

The fact that Celeste still spoke with a trace of a French accent almost as elusive as Eleana's drawl only added to her charm. "So nice to meet you, Mr. Connors." She pinched Eleana's cheek. "Eleana has told me all about you."

So saying, she walked on into the dining room and called for a maid to bring her a bowl for the short-stemmed white roses she was carrying.

Connors looked at Eleana. Her smile was wry. "Don't flatter yourself. I haven't mentioned your name. Except to Uncle John. Celeste says that to all the boys. It's merely mother's way of making you feel welcome."

"Oh," Connors said. "I see."

Eleana's fingers bit into his arm. "Please, Ad. Mother's worked so hard. She's so happy about my making what she calls a good marriage. Let's not tell her what you suspect. I mean about father. At least not 'till we're certain."

"I think that's wise," Hayes said. "There's no need of alarming Celeste. Why not let Sheriff Thompson nose around and see what he finds out. There are three dozen men in town who worked with and for Don. And if it was Don who fired those shots, if Don is in Blue Mound, one of them is certain to recognize him."

Connors asked if there was any chance of Donald Hayes coming to the house.

"Here? Don come here? After what he did to me?" John

Hayes was vehement about it. "I'm not fond of running a cob pipe factory and a bank, young man." He indicated the playbills. "That was my circus. It was my life. I loved it. And Don sold me down the river for a hot pants Gypsy tramp and less money than we often took in on a good two-day stand."

Hayes walked up the stairs to the balcony on some errand of his own. Alone with Eleana, Connors took her by the elbows. "Baby, please. You have to listen to me. You can't go through with this marriage."

He attempted to kiss her and Eleana slapped him. "I told you to get out of my life." Then, twisting free, she joined her mother in the dining room.

Supper was at nine. Celeste did most of the talking. Connors and Lautenbach were the only guests although Connors gathered from Celeste's conversation that a good sized crowd of Eleana and Lautenbach's friends was expected for the weekend.

The dining room opened on a well-kept lawn that sloped down to a river. From time to time as he ate, John Hayes looked thoughtfully out the tall French windows. Once when he dropped his napkin and stooped to retrieve it, Connors saw the black butt of a gun under John Hayes' left arm pit.

"And what is your business, Mr. Connors?"

The question came from Lautenbach. "I write," Connors said.

Eleana added, "Adventure and detective stories. Mr. Connors has a wonderful imagination."

Connors let it go at that. His recent conversation with Shad and the news of the Tanner Press sale seemed very remote and unimportant. He'd expected to dislike Lautenbach. He didn't. He didn't feel anything toward him. A lean man with a wisp of a sandy mustache, Lautenbach was a gentleman, burned out in his middle forties. If he was curi-

ous as to why Connors was in Blue Mound he was too well bred to ask. From time to time during the meal his watery blue eyes appraised Eleana without heat.

Connors doubted the marriage would last. The man had nothing to give Eleana. Marrying Allan Lautenbach would be equivalent to marrying a piece of limp toast. The man had spent everything but his money.

They had their coffee and liqueur in the living room. At ten o'clock the phone rang. When he returned from answering it, John Hayes sat on the sofa beside Connors.

"That was Sheriff Thompson. There were no fingerprints on the shotgun. The gun is an old one that was kept in a downstairs back closet of the hotel. Thompson thinks it originally belonged to me. He thinks it's the gun I gave Mac-Millan five years ago when the old man wanted to go rabbit hunting."

He kept his voice down. So did Connors. "Anyone could get at it?"

"Anyone."

"You mentioned the fact we think your brother may be in town?"

"No," Hayes said flatly. "I didn't."

Across the room, Allan Lautenbach's voice droned on in a chukker by chukker, hoof beat by hoof beat description of an international polo match in which he'd played. Only Celeste pretended interest. Slumped on the end of her pretty spine, Eleana was candidly bored. Shortly after the phone call she suggested she and Allan drive out to a roadhouse called the Barn. They left a few minutes later without inviting Connors to accompany them.

With Allan and Eleana's departure conversation became even more desultory. It was obvious to Connors that his presence in the house both puzzled and worried Eleana's mother. But, as with Allan Lautenbach, she was too much of a lady to ask personal questions.

At ten thirty she supplied herself with magazines, excused herself graciously, and said goodnight.

John Hayes watched her up the stairs. Connors watched John Hayes. If ever a man was in love with a woman Hayes was in love with Celeste. Connors thought of the *twist* he'd written for Jack Blade and began to wonder.

John Hayes had known he was in town. John Hayes was tall and broad shouldered. John Hayes owned Blue Mound. John Hayes knew where the shotgun was kept. Hayes House was only a mile from town. After firing the two shots, Hayes could have reached it in ample time to return with Eleana. The small veins in Connors' temples began to throb.

What if *his* version of the story had been the correct one? What if Donald Hayes had returned to Blue Mound a week early to find his brother, John, making love to Celeste? What if in the fight that followed John Hayes had killed his brother and used a similar cover to the one he'd schemed up in his story? What if John Hayes had killed Attorney Santchez?

Against that was the fact that Hayes had armed himself.

Connors waited for the other man to drink, then poured himself one from the bottle Hayes set out. Murder destroyed and distorted values. When one dealt with it, anything was possible. It was even possible, considering Eleana's vehement refusal to make a deposition or appear in court, that *she* had killed Santchez. Eleana had a temper. She wanted the Lautenberg money. She had discovered the body.

What if while he had slept Eleana had talked to Santchez? What if she'd learned the marriage license she wanted didn't exist? What if in her fear of losing Allan, or of possible future blackmail, Eleana had taken the most expedient way of sealing Caesar A. Santchez's mouth.

Her pretended fright and shock could have been an act. She was a clever actress. As soon as her need for him was finished, she'd dropped him at the border and ordered him out

of her life. Still, the locket didn't fit into that picture. It was an over-complication of plot. And Eleana wasn't a fool. If she'd stabbed Santchez she wouldn't have left anything behind to call attention to herself or any member of her family.

In the car John Hayes had offered the alternative, 'Continue on to the house as my guest and we'll discuss this at greater length.' Now they were alone Connors waited for him to begin. Instead Hayes drank in silence, scowling at the floor. At eleven thirty he stood up and wound his watch. "I'm going to bed. If I were you I'd lock my door tonight."

Connors got to his feet. "I intend to. But before you leave would you answer two questions? First, were your brother and Celeste legally married?"

Hayes said, "I have no reason to believe otherwise. They left after we dropped the top in Omaha and rejoined the show in Des Moines, saying they had been married. Celeste says they were married in a small town. But in those days she knew very little English and Don had the license on his person the night he ran away with Tamara. What's your second question?"

"Do you approve of Eleana's marrying Lautenbach?"

"No," Hayes said flatly. "Lautenbach is marrying an aphrodisiac. The chances are what manhood he has left is in his head. Marriage to him will revolt and disgust Eleana." Hayes shrugged. "But I've nothing to say about it. I'm her uncle, not her father."

Connors watched him up the stairs then walked out on the lawn. The moon was full and low. At the foot of the hill the river winding off into the night to disappear behind a clump of silhouetted trees looked like silver foil.

Connors walked down to the river and threw stones in it for a few minutes. Then he climbed the hill back to the house. Seen from the rear Hayes House was even more impressive than it was from the front drive. For a bankrupt former circus owner, John Hayes had done well.

To reach the other side of the house Connors cut through a grape arbor and found himself in the vicinity of a recently lighted trash fire. The fire had almost burned out. He glanced at it incuriously and started on when a last flickering tongue of flame illuminated a familiar looking piece of paper. Stooping, Connors rescued it from the fire. It was the charred title page of the carbon copy of KILL ME, MAÑANA.

He walked on around the house. Two of the second floor rooms were lighted. The shades on one were drawn. Through the open window of the other room he could see John Hayes kneeling beside his bed in fervent prayer.

His nerve ends tingling, Connors lighted a cigarette. He had a hunch if he was to enjoy the money and prestige the Tanner Press contract could bring him, it was up to him to find out what the poohbah of Blue Mound was bothering God about.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was a whistling morning. The robins and meadow larks sang. The sparrows cheeped. A soft west wind shepherded a flock of gamboling white clouds across the sky. Connors felt like hell. He wished whoever had tried to kill him would drop the other shoe.

He parked the car John Hayes had insisted he use and sent a wire to Shad. Then he drove to the hotel to get his bag.

The youthful clerk was sorry. "Gee. That's a shame, Mr. Connors. But Sheriff Thompson took your bag last night. Why don't you go over to his office and get it?"

"I may do that," Connors said.

He asked to see the closet where the shotgun had been kept. It was in a small hall in the back of the hotel, sealed off from the lobby by a fire door.

"It's a kind of a catch-all," the clerk said.

A door led from the hall to the service yard enclosed by the high board fence. The door was wedged open.

"It was that way last night?" Connors asked.

The clerk nodded. "It's always open in summer. Excepting when it rains."

A walk led to a wide areaway between the hotel and the building next door. Anyone in Blue Mound so minded could have walked back through the areaway, taken the shotgun from the closet, then walked up the fire escape to the landing outside Room 205.

Connors offered the youth a cigarette. "Mr. Hayes wasn't around last night, was he? I mean shortly before the shooting?"

The clerk shook his head. "Not that I know of."

Out on the walk in front of the hotel again Connors felt the bristles on his chin and decided to be shaved before calling on Sheriff Thompson. The sun felt good.

He stood a moment longer looking in the window of the smart florist shop next to the hotel, admiring a corsage of short-stemmed white roses and sweet peas. He wished he could buy it for Eleana. He felt the cheek she'd slapped.

"I told you to get out of my life."

All right. He would. Connors moved on up the street. He'd get out of Eleana's life, and get her out of his, as fast as he possibly could. But he didn't intend to make his exit on a stretcher.

There was a hardware store in the middle of the block. He bought a revolver and a box of cartridges and loaded the revolver before holstering it in his coat pocket. Then he looked for a barber shop.

The barber shaved him in silence until the second go-over. Then the scrape of razor stopped briefly. "You're that writing fellow in whose room Mac was killed last night, ain't you?"

"That's right," Connors said.

The barber scraped a stubborn whorl of beard. "You figure the guy was trying for you?"

"At least Sheriff Thompson seems to?"

"Funny," the barber said.

"What's funny?" Connors asked.

"The guy turning loose both barrels so fast. I mean before he made certain it was you. Doc Hanson says even at the distance he almost missed with one barrel. Must have been nervous."

"Or in a hurry."

The scrape of the razor resumed. When it paused again Connors asked casually, "Say. By the way. Wasn't Mr. Hayes out of town about four weeks ago? I thought I saw him in New York."

"That could be," the barber said. "I wouldn't know. John's in and out of town a lot on bank and factory business."

"He's out of town a lot, eh?"

"Quite a bit," the barber said.

Shaved, Connors walked across the street to the sheriff's office. Thompson was sitting with his feet on his desk. He didn't bother to lower them. From the smell of his breath and the office, he'd been drinking heavily. "Well," he greeted Connors. "One of the privileged class come to tell the rube sheriff what it's all about. That's why you did drop in, isn't it, Mr. Connors?"

Connors sat on the edge of the desk. "Let's understand each other, Thompson. If I knew the score, I'd tell you. I may know it within the next hour. If I do, I'll tell you then. But right now all I've dropped in for is my bag. You do have it, I believe?"

Thompson nodded at the traveling bag Connors had bought in Laredo. "There it is. Take it. Or, you being a guest at Hayes House am I supposed to carry it out to the car for you?"

Connors ignored the sarcasm. "No progress since last night, I suppose? No one in town has reported the usual mysterious stranger?"

Thompson took a bottle from one of the desk drawers and bought himself a drink while he considered the question. Then, returning the bottle to the drawer without offering a drink to Connors, he said, sourly, "On a transcontinental highway you don't have mysterious strangers. But no stranger to Blue Mound killed Mac. No one just passing through would know where that shotgun was kept, know you were in Room 205."

There was a crumpled package of cigarettes on the desk. Connors slipped a cigarette from the pack and straightened it. "No," he agreed. "They wouldn't. And while we're on the subject. The barber across the street just gave me something to think about. Whoever killed MacMillan was in a hurry, nervous, or both. In fact I hear he almost missed with one barrel. That at a distance of a few feet. The chances are, in that case, he wasn't holding the gun tight to his shoulder and it kicked hob out of him."

"So?"

"So his shoulder is probably black and blue this morning."

Sheriff Thompson was alcoholically enthused. "Fine. Leave it to a detective story writer and a barber to figure out a way to trap the dastardly criminal before the dumb rube sheriff even knows what all the shooting's about. Now all I have to do is strip the shirt and undershirt off every male in Blue Mound. And when I find a man with a black and blue shoulder, presto. I have the lad who had a try for you and wound up killing Mac. I'll get busy on it right away."

He took the bottle from the drawer again.

"I just thought I'd tell you."

"Thanks. I appreciate it, fellow."

Connors picked his bag from the floor. "You have everything you want out of here, I trust?"

"Everything," Thompson said. He lighted his dead cigar and puffed on it with relish. "All I wanted was a little information. And I got it. I learned from your copy of the contract that you just sold a book to some outfit called Tanner Press and that your agent is a man named Shad Schaeffer with offices at 580 Fifth Avenue, New York. I also learned from a pair of receipted hotel bills that you recently stopped at the Hotel Claremont in New York and before that spent two weeks at the Plaza Hotel in Laredo. And I incorporated all of it in my wire."

"Your wire?"

Thompson was pleased with Thompson. "That's right. To New York. I wired the District Attorney's office telling them what I knew and asking them what *they* knew about you and if they knew of anyone who had reason to want to blow you in two."

That tears it, Connors thought. He didn't know the exact legal procedure. New York would probably wire back and ask Sheriff Thompson to hold him. And Sheriff Thompson would be pleased to accommodate New York.

"I don't think," Connors said finally, "that John Hayes is going to approve of what you've done."

Thompson put his feet back on his desk. "Pee on John Hayes. This is a murder case, son. The electorate voted me in. And until they vote me out, I'm the sheriff."

Decidedly the worm had turned.

Connors walked out of the office carrying his bag, the revolver sagging his side coat pocket. He put the bag in his borrowed car. Then looking at his watch he found he still had half an hour before his eleven o'clock appointment with the local poohbah. He killed it drowning butterflies in coffee but there were still a few fluttering sodden wings in his stomach when he walked into the bank.

The girl back of the railing opened the gate. "Right this way, Mr. Connors. Mr. Hayes told me to expect you."

Hayes' office was large but plainly furnished. Eleana was before him. Connors admired the small of her sun-tanned back as Eleana pounded her small fist on Hayes' desk.

"But what am I going to do?" Eleana demanded. "What am I going to do?"

John Hayes looked older than he had the night before. The lines in his face seemed deeper. Nodding to Connors, he said, "Pull up a chair and sit down, Mr. Connors."

Connors drew a chair up to the desk and smiled pleasantly at Eleana. "Before I unburden my soul, what new rain has fallen to dampen your young life?"

Eleana bit at her lower lip. "The Lautenbach lawyers will be here tomorrow to draw up the marriage contract. And if one of them asks for mother's marriage certificate, what am I going to tell him?"

Connors hazarded a guess. "That you're afraid you may be a little bastard?" He moved his legs to one side as Eleana kicked at his shins.

"That," John Hayes said, "will be enough of that. Sit down, Eleana. If it wasn't for Celeste, I'd wash my hands of both of you."

Eleana sat scowling at Connors.

Connors said, "I'm afraid you can't, Mr. Hayes. Your pet sheriff has slipped his leash. He's wired New York for information on me. You know what their answer will be. And I'm not going back to Mexico to protect your reputation or Eleana's chance of marrying a millionaire. As soon as a cell door closes on me I'm going to start talking. I'm going to talk loud and long. I'm going to tell the whole thing just as it happened from the minute Eleana smacked her Ford into General Estaban's Cadillac in the intersection of Tacuba and Teatro Nacional up to, and including, our tender parting in a cab in Laredo when Eleana told me to get out of her life after clipping me for a last two hundred and thirty dollars."

"I clipped you?" Eleana said. "Ha." She took a check from Hayes' desk and used his desk pen to fill it in.

Hayes picked up his phone and asked the operator to connect him with the railroad station. When the connection was made, he said, "This is John, Charlie. You're going to receive a wire from New York for Jimmy Thompson in reply to the wire he sent. When it comes in bring it up to the bank. And if Jimmy inquires about it tell him there hasn't been any answer as yet."

Hayes cradled the phone and lighted a cigar.

His grin tight, Connors said, "At the risk of sounding corny, you can't get away with that. No man can play God."

Hayes puffed at his cigar. "I can, in Blue Mound."

Eleana handed Connors the check. "There's your two hundred and thirty dollars. Thank you very much."

Connors put the check in his wallet. "Thank *you*, Miss Hayes."

John Hayes continued. "For example. I know you asked the clerk at the hotel if he'd seen me before the shooting last night. I know you purchased a .38 caliber, five inch barrel Smith and Wesson revolver and a box of cartridges for it. I imagine that's what's sagging your pocket. I also know you asked the barber if I was out of town four weeks ago."

Connors put his hand on the gun in his pocket. "You must be psychic."

Hayes' smile was thin. "Things come to me. But not in a supernatural way. It just so happens I own the hotel. I advanced the money for Joe to start his hardware store. Bill used to run the barber concession on my circus. Charlie is an old friend. We're all ex-showmen in a small town. And we still come running when one of us yells, 'Hey Rube.' Now let me ask you a question. What makes you think it might have been I who shot MacMillan last night?"

Eleana gasped. "But that's ridiculous."

"Utterly," John Hayes agreed. He spoke without emphasis or heat. The lack of either made his statement that much more deadly. It was just that, a statement. "I assure you, Mr. Connors, if I wanted to take your life I wouldn't be nervous

or in a hurry about it. And I would kill you, not an old man whom I liked. Well, I asked you a question."

Connors didn't know what to say.

Eleana said, "He's thinking of that silly story he wrote in Guadalajara. I told him about father and Tamara and Pablo. But because father sent me money every month, Ad said he had a well-developed sense of responsibility and wouldn't have killed Attorney Santchez the way he did and gotten me into a jam. So he turned the story around. In his story father came home unexpectedly and caught you making love to Celeste. So you killed father and buried him. Then you killed Pablo when he tried to blackmail you and paid Tamara to leave town so people would think father had run away with her. Of course you took the money father was carrying. But your conscience began to hurt you so you made an arrangement with Attorney Santchez to send me fifty dollars every month purporting to come from father. Then last month, when I drove down to Mexico to look up father and take care of the license business, you were afraid Attorney Santchez would expose you. So you flew down to Mexico, lured Santchez to Uruapan, killed him and left father's locket in his hand. I don't recall if Ad explained *where* you got the locket."

Connors said, "He took it from his brother's body when he killed him twenty years ago."

Hayes looked at Connors with fresh interest. "Is that the story as you wrote it?"

"Substantially."

"And someone bought it?"

"They did."

Hayes removed his cigar from his lips. "I'd like to read it sometime."

Connors loosened his tie with his left hand. "Are you certain you didn't read it? Eleana had a carbon copy. And I found the title pages in a rubbish fire back of Hayes House

shortly after you said goodnight and I'd walked down to the river."

Hayes' voice was flat. "No. I didn't read it. I don't have much time to read."

"Oh, that," Eleana said. "I threw the carbons of both stories away just before supper last night. I threw them in the kitchen trash can." Her drawl with the lilt at the end of her words was more obvious sometimes. This was one of the times. "I was so darn mad about you showing up in Blue Mound."

Connors asked her, "And before that, where did you keep the carbons of the stories?"

"In one of the drawers in my vanity." Eleana twisted the knife. "Nestled in sachets of lavender. Against my old age."

Hayes smoked in silence a moment. Then he said, "I begin to see your point of view, Mr. Connors. I understand why you're keeping your hand on the gun in your pocket. If I had murdered my brother over Celeste's affections I might have followed a similar course to the one outlined in your story. I undoubtedly would have covered the murder somehow. Undoubtedly my conscience would have bothered me and I'd have made some arrangement to send money for Eleana's support. I certainly would have killed this Mexican attorney to keep from being exposed. And, matters transpiring as they have, I certainly would kill, or attempt to kill, you to keep from being returned to Mexico and executed."

He's cool. He's shrewd, Connors thought. I underestimated the man.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

His cigar protruding from between his fingers Hayes put his elbows on his desk and rested his forehead in his hands. The silence in the office became almost unbearable. Then, lifting his head, John Hayes said:

"Unfortunately the only thing true about your version of the story is that I am in love with Celeste. I was in love with her when she and Don ran away and were married."

Connors asked, "Why haven't you married her then?"

Hayes said, as flatly, "Because she won't have me. She's still in love with a dream. Despite what he did to her and Eleana, Don is still her man. She still keeps their first cottage as a shrine. She still hopes someday Don will return to her."

Connors took his hand from his pocket. "It's a good story," he admitted. You could get five cents a word for that from *True Confession*. But I still incline to the theory Don Hayes is dead and buried somewhere here in Blue Mound. Over sixteen hours have passed since MacMillan was killed. If your brother is in town, alive, someone would have seen him."

"Not necessarily." Hayes returned his cigar to his lips. "Don was born in this country. He knows every tree, every hill, every cave. We played in them as boys." He pushed back his chair and stood up. "Frankly, I don't know what to do or what to think. We can't stall this thing forever. I'm not simple minded enough to think we can. It has come at an inopportune moment."

Connors lighted a cigarette and offered the first puff to Eleana. "No, thank you," she said sweetly. "I'm not certain it's sanitary."

Hayes ground out his cigar. "If it was Don who killed Mac the whole thing will have to come out in the open regardless of how it may affect Eleana's wedding plans. But while there's a possible chance of some other solution, I'd like to spare Celeste if we can. How about it, Mr. Connors? How about giving me twenty-four more hours to work on this?"

Connors' grin was wry. "What with you having the sheriff, Western Union, and the railroad station in your pocket I don't seem to have much of a choice."

"Suppose I could prove to your satisfaction I didn't kill my brother?"

"That would be something else."

Hayes took a folder from a filing case. "It was on the night of March 28, 1931 that Don returned from California, killed Pablo, and ran away with Tamara. You can check the date with two dozen men in town." Taking a letter from the folder he handed it to Connors. "Where was this letter written? On what date?"

Connors glanced at the letter. "Mexico City, 9/5/36."

"Read it."

The letter was written in a bold masculine hand on Hotel Geneve stationery. It read:

Dear John:

So I'm a heel. I couldn't help myself. But it was a mess for nothing. Tamara was killed in a car accident near Acapulco shortly after we reached here.

Enclosed find draft for five thousand dollars on the Banco Nacional De Mexico. It's a small part of what I owe you but I'm in on an oil deal that looks promising. If it develops, I'll send more. It won't bring back the show but at least we'll be square as to cash. Meanwhile, tell Celeste I'll continue to send money for Eleana's support through my attorney here. I can be reached through him. Address Attorney Caesar A. Santchez, Calle Tacuba 23, Mexico City, Mexico.

Don

Connors handed the letter back to Hayes. "That seems to shoot my theory. Eleana told me about the letter but I didn't know it was handwritten. It's in your brother's handwriting?"

"I'd swear to that in court."

"That was the five thousand dollars you gave Eleana's mother to pay down on a house?"

"It was."

"And your brother never sent any more money?"

"Not a penny."

"Then Hayes House, the cob pipe factory, the hotel, this bank, Blue Mound—"

John Hayes worried his now sodden cigar. His voice was bitter. "Were all built on hard work. Dirty eighteen-hour-a-day hard work and a desire to make up to Celeste the misery Don caused her." He returned the letter to the folder and the folder to the file. "For all the good it did. Outside of the payment on the house in Chicago, and she had to have shelter, Celeste has always refused to accept any money from me. To eke out Don's fifty a month she's clerked in stores, sold corsets and cosmetics and magazine subscriptions. She's sung in dingy night clubs, waited table, scrubbed floors, to keep herself and Eleana going. Why, I practically had to use force to get her to accept enough of a loan to cover Eleana's four years at Normal." Hayes' voice was as gray as his face. "Why? Because Celeste hopes someday Don will come back and she doesn't want to be obligated to any other man. She wants to be able to say, 'Here I am, Don. Just as you left me, twenty years ago.'"

Hayes turned and looked out the window. Eleana looked at Ad, her eyes pleading with him to understand. "That's the main reason I'm so determined to marry Allan. I don't love him. I know what I'm getting into. But I'm tired of being poor. I'm tired of counting pennies. And while mother won't take any money from Uncle John, she will take money from me. And I want to be able to give her the things I'll never be able to give her otherwise."

Eleana dabbed at her eyes with the back of her hand. Connors handed her his breast pocket handkerchief. "Here. Blow hard." The pleasant pain was back in his groin. The sluggish beat was gone from his pulse. Eleana looked more than ever like a starry-eyed adolescent riding a merry-go-round much too big and swift for her.

I love you, Shad, Connors thought. He considered telling Eleana about the Tanner Press sale. It wasn't the place or

the time. He didn't want to buy her. That would put him in a class with Allan Lautenbach.

Eleana wiped her eyes and put the handkerchief in her purse. "Now even if Allan's lawyer doesn't make a fuss about proof of mother's marriage to father all this will have to come out." A tear trickled down her cheek. "And the only reason old Mr. Lautenbach likes and put his stamp of approval on me is because I've never been in any scandal. I'm just a healthy little mouse of a public school teacher in whom his beloved son Allan will plant the sacred seed that will germinate into a spoiled brat, heir to the Lautenbach millions, here-in-after to be known to the financial and horsey set as Allan Lautenbach III. This, of course, after appropriate ceremony, the burning of incense and sprinkling of attar." Eleana wiped the tear from her cheek. "If Allan II is still able to plant a seed."

Connors laughed.

John Hayes was shocked. "Eleana."

Eleana opened her purse, took out Ad's handkerchief, and blew her nose. "Well, it was nice having money while it lasted. Now I'll probably even lose my job."

Hayes asked Connors, "Okay on twenty-four hours?"

Connors shrugged. "What have I to lose? But what about Sheriff Thompson?"

"I'll take care of Thompson," Hayes said. He lifted the switch of the inter-office annunciator. "I'm leaving for the balance of the day, Miss Harris. And I won't be available to anyone."

Connors asked if he could be of any assistance.

"Yes," Hayes said. "Stay alive. I've enough to worry about now. I don't want you on my conscience." He added, "And you stay close to Mr. Connors, Eleana. Your father is much less apt to take another potshot at our guest if he's in your company."

After the air conditioned bank the street was like an oven. Eleana blew up at a lock of hair the heat had plastered to

her forehead. "How," she asked, unsmiling, "would you like to buy me something tall and cold and filled with gin?"

Connors played along with the gag. "Be careful. You are speaking of the woman I love."

Eleana looked at her watch. "Then we'll have to drive out to the cottage and get mother."

"The cottage?" Connors puzzled.

Eleana explained. "Where I was born. Where she and father lived. Mother works in it or the garden almost every morning we're in Blue Mound."

The relief afforded by the gin bucks was temporary. It was cooler driving than it had been in the cocktail lounge. Connors thought of a thousand things to say but couldn't isolate any one. It was familiar and normal being with Eleana. It brought back pleasant memories.

Eleana felt the same way. But she was articulate. "I'm sorry, Ad. I'm sorry it has to be this way. You've put me in exactly the same spot mother's in. I'll never forget you. I couldn't. Corny or not, we've been too much to each other. We've been through too much together. I've tried to put you out of my mind. And I can't. It isn't all physical. It's the *rebozo* and the flowers you bought me. It's your never once scolding about me being so foolish as to go out with General Estaban. It's the fun I had on the merry-go-round. It's window shopping in Guadalajara. It's the electric iron you borrowed, watching you while you slept, after working all night—for me."

Connors wondered why so many people were so ashamed and so afraid of corn. It was the gossamer fabric of which dreams were woven, the bedrock on which lives were built. He slackened the speed of the car while he waited for Eleana to continue.

Eleana laid her hand on his arm. "I'll always remember and treasure the time we had together. You are nice, Ad. I like you. I only wish I'd never met you."

They were in open country now on a tree-shaded road.

Pulling over on the shoulder, Connors reached for the ignition key to kill the motor and Eleana blocked his hand.

"No, Ad."

He protested, "But I just want to tell you something."

Eleana transferred her fingers to his lips. "I don't want to hear it. I still intend to marry Allan if I can. I think I can. As far as you and I are concerned the boat sailed in Nuevo Laredo. And there's no sense in both of us just getting upset again."

"Well, we'll see," Connors said. He kissed her fingers and, for the time being, let it go at that.

Hayes Cottage was white, a story and a half. It looked substantial but unlivd in. The shed and outhouses were in poor repair. Four or more acres of nettle and milk-weed separated it from the fringe of willow and cottonwood that bordered the river. There was a half-dead elm tree in the yard. The garden was beautiful. Back of a blue alyssum border vari-colored portulaca formed a base for a riot of gladioli, golden California poppies, petunias, snapdragons, marigolds, zinnias, and cosmos. A flowering vine of heavenly blue morning glories, closed now against the heat of the day, completely covered the small front porch. The front door of the cottage was open. So were most of the first and second story windows. A hot west wind billowed stiffly starched curtains out of what must have been a stifling interior. Wearing a halter and shorts and a pair of no-longer-white gardening gloves, a smudge of dirt across her nose, Celeste sat on the front stoop surrounded by trowels and weederes and spray guns and insecticides.

"What love does for a woman," Eleana said. "Mother keeps that darn cottage just as if she expected father home for supper. She even used to tack a card with our address on the door when we left for Chicago. She's compromised on that now. She just leaves a key under the mat and a note on the kitchen table."

Celeste waved gaily as Connors stopped the car. "So

soon?" she asked Eleana. She appealed to Connors. "Where has the morning gone, Mr. Connors? I am not half finished with what I hoped to do." She looked at the garden. "You like?"

"Very much," Connors said. He was referring to both the garden and Celeste. In her green shorts and halter she was lovely as Eleana. He didn't blame John Hayes for being in love with her.

Eleana studied the garden critically. "You know, mother, you ought to pull up some of those California poppies. They're spreading all over and crowding out everything else."

Celeste added another smudge of dirt to her nose as she pondered the matter. "I like them," she decided. She peeled off her garden gloves. "But lunch will be waiting. You both are probably starved." She smiled at Connors. "I will be with you as soon as I resume a skirt and blouse."

Blowing a kiss to Eleana she disappeared into the house.

"She's pretty," Connors said.

Eleana nodded. "Celeste's a sweetheart. And she has a few good breaks coming to her. I mean to see she gets them. Uncle John wasn't kidding about her scrubbing floors to bring me up."

Connors returned his attention to the garden. "I see what your uncle meant when he used the word shrine. Your mother and father planted the garden together?"

"I don't think so," Eleana answered. "In fact I'm certain they didn't. At first there were just a few poppies growing wild. Then Celeste added the other flowers."

"Do you think he might come here?"

"My father?" Eleana thought a moment then shook her head. "It's possible. But I doubt it. I doubt it very much, Ad."

"Why?"

"Because I'm inclined to agree with you as to his character. Pablo caught him in bed with Tamara. Father had to kill

him and run away with her. Attorney Santchez threatened to expose him and father closed his mouth in the most expedient manner. But I don't think he could be enough of a heel to break Celeste's heart again by deliberately dragging her into this second mess."

"That," Connors said, "would seem to me to fall into the catagory of being a moot question."

"What is a moot question?"

"Whether her heart would be broken or whether she would consider the physical return of his love sufficient compensation for any possible involvement in his latest escapade."

He lighted a cigarette and offered it to Eleana. She started to reach for it, then shook her head. "No, thank you," she drawled primly.

There was the squeak of a rusty pump inside the house and the splash of water in a tin sink. Then the billowing curtains were pulled in and the windows closed. A few minutes later Celeste appeared in the front doorway again wearing a sheer white blouse and having trouble with a wrap-around skirt. "Is not nice to be a woman, no?" she smiled at Connors. "One must be so modest while a man can wear anything." She closed and locked the front door and put the key under the mat. "A woman can show her legs on a beach, yes. But in the town, no." Celeste laughed. "And of course on the back of a horse as it used to be in the circus."

Eleana laughed with her. "Silly." She inspected her mother's face. One of the two smudges of dirt was gone but Celeste had missed the other one. Eleana took a piece of tissue from the glove compartment and wet a corner with her tongue. "Here. Let me get that dirt off your nose. And you'd better use my lipstick. Yours is smeared all over your mouth."

Celeste submitted meekly to the cleansing and accepted Eleana's lipstick and mirror. She used the tissue to wipe the

outline of her lips. Then between strokes of the lipstick she appealed to Connors. "Eleana is hard on me. No, Mr. Connors?"

Grinning, Connors started to turn the car around. Catching sight of a billowing curtain, Eleana stopped him. "And you've left the front upstairs window open. Want me to run up and close it, mother?"

Celeste continued to apply lipstick. "No. That will not be necessary."

"But what if it rains?"

Celeste shrugged her slim shoulders and returned the lipstick and mirror to Eleana. "It will not rain in the next few hours. And I intend to come back this afternoon." Celeste touched her hair to make certain it was in order and Connors saw her fingers were trembling slightly. "We were apart so long this time, my garden and I. I still have so much to do. Drive to Hayes House, Mr. Connors."

Connors backed the car to turn it around. As he did he glanced up at the window casually and a hard, invisible fist hit him in the pit of his stomach. He opened his mouth, then closed it.

A gray spiral of smoke that could only be coming from a lighted cigarette or cigar was wafting lazily out of the open second story window.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Allan Lautenbach forked a piece of avocado. "Then in the second chukker, Fleetwind sprained a tendon and I had to substitute a decidedly inferior mount. As I recall, it was Bayrick out of Cakra by Red Valiant. Yes. I remember now. I'd purchased him the week before from an English colonel. The colt had good blood. Definitely. But he hadn't lived up to either strain. Nevertheless—"

Connors wished Lautenbach would choke on the piece

of avocado. Horses and women seemed to be the only things he knew. And the women he had known, undoubtedly, made better barroom than table conversation.

Connors shut Lautenbach out of his mind and looked across the table at Celeste. Celeste was eating little. From time to time she smiled at some inner thought and ran the tips of her fingers over her cheeks or touched her lips. When spoken to she answered. But only her physical body was present at the table.

Connors transferred his attention to Eleana. Eleana refused to meet his eyes. Her small jaw took on a decided set as she forced herself to pretend interest in what Lautenbach was saying.

It would serve her right, Connors thought, if I let her marry him.

He wished he knew what to do. He couldn't confide in Eleana. He was afraid to confide in John Hayes. Both of them worshiped Celeste. Either of them would throw him to the wolves for her. He was glad when lunch was over.

Celeste fluttered around the living room for a few minutes, then insisted she had to get back to her garden. "I have so much to do."

Eleana suggested, "Why don't we three go swimming? We can all pile into Allan's car, drop mother off, then go on out to the club pool."

"We three?" Lautenbach puzzled. He turned his watery blue eyes on Connors. "Oh. Yes. Of course. Mr Connors."

"You can count me out," Connors said. "But I will accept a ride back to town."

Eleana began a protest, then changed her mind. "Suit yourself. It's too hot to argue." She smiled at Lautenbach. "We'd better dress here, Allan. The locker rooms out at the club are rather antiquated and Uncle John hasn't got around to having renovating them."

"Right," Lautenbach said. "Right."

He and Eleana went upstairs to put on swimsuits. Celeste

continued to flutter around the room. Connors wished she would light somewhere. She was beginning to make him nervous.

Celeste fluffed a cushion then began to rearrange a perfectly good arrangement of the white roses that had been the supper table decoration the preceding night. "Mr. Lautenbach is nice. Don't you think so, Mr. Connors?"

"No," Connors said flatly. "I don't."

"No?" Celeste was momentarily perturbed, then she laughed. "I see. You are one of Eleana's former suitors. I begin to understand. You came to Blue Mound hoping she might change her mind. I am sorry. Believe me, Mr. Connors." Celeste gave his cheek a motherly pat. "But love is sometimes cruel. A girl must marry as well as she can. And I am very happy about this. It is a good marriage for Eleana. She will be secure for life."

Yeah, Connors thought. Also up to her neck in horse chips.

He looked up as Eleana came down the stairs wearing a wisp of a bathing suit and trailing a white silk dressing gown behind her. The bitchy smile was back on her lips as she drawled, "Certain you won't come with us, Ad?"

"Certain," Connors said.

Lautenbach followed close behind Eleana. And no matter what his lawyers might say, Eleana would have no trouble in marrying him. His eyes bugged every time he looked at her.

Celeste picked up her purse. "If we are ready."

Connors rode in the back seat with Celeste. The hot dry wind had died. The curtain no longer billowed out the second floor window of the cottage. It sat asleep in the sun. Even the flowers looked drowsy. Connors helped Celeste out of the car with a wary eye on the open window.

Eleana kissed her mother. "Have a good time, dear."

"I will," Celeste assured her. Taking the key from under

the mat she entered the cottage and a moment later the routine of opening windows began.

Lautenbach turned his imported car around. "A charming person, your mother, Eleana. As I understand it from your uncle, she keeps this cottage as a shrine in memory of your father. He has been dead some time?"

"Twenty years," Eleana said.

"How touching."

Neither he nor Eleana spoke again until they were entering Blue Mound. Then, visibly relieved Connors wasn't to accompany them, Lautenbach was gracious to him. "Any particular place in town you care to be dropped, Mr. Connors?"

"Any place," Connors said.

Lautenbach glanced over his shoulder. "Interesting profession, yours. I've often thought I'd like to take up writing. I've had so many interesting experiences. Know I could write a book about them if I tried."

He stopped the car in front of the hardware store and waited for Connors to get out. He was hot. He was worried. Being patronized annoyed Connors. He'd had about all he could take of Allan Lautenbach. Getting out of the car, Connors said, "As I see it, there would only be two drawbacks in your writing such a book."

Lautenbach fell into the trap. "And what would they be?"

"Horses can't read," Connors said. "And you'd have to write the other half on bathroom stationery."

Eleana said, "Ad," sharply.

The car was a right hand drive. Lautenbach stepped out on the walk and faced Connors. His sallow face was mottled with color. "Now just one minute, Mr. Connors. I don't like that remark. I don't like you. In fact I more than dislike you. I'm curious. Just what is your standing at Hayes House? Eleana tells me she didn't invite you. I'm certain that I didn't. Just what is your business in Blue Mound?"

Elcana said, "Ad," again. There was a pleading note in her voice this time.

Connors rubbed the knuckles of his right hand with the fingers of his left. The chin a few inches away was a tempting target. But fighting with Lautenbach wouldn't help anything. The other man was well within his rights in asking the question he had. Connors compromised. "Let's say it's a matter of business. Why?"

Lautenbach wasn't a coward. "I just thought I'd ask on the chance you might care to take the question personally."

A small group of curious had formed. Connors felt suddenly shamed. He felt like one of two dogs yapping over a bitch in heat. "Okay, Lautenbach," he said. "You've impressed Eleana with your rugged manhood. Go on and have your swim."

Rounding the car he walked across the street and into the bank. Hayes' secretary was pleasant, but no help. She said, "No. I haven't seen Mr. Hayes since he left with you and Miss Hayes this morning."

"I just thought I'd ask," Connors said.

He was relieved not to find Hayes in. He still wasn't certain it would be wise to confide in him. He wished he knew what to do.

The smoke he'd seen had been real. It hadn't been a figment of his imagination. If Celeste was concealing some man in the upper front room of the cottage it was logical to assume the man was the husband for whom she'd waited twenty years. But what to do about it?

That morning, leaving his borrowed car in front of the hotel, he'd rolled up the windows and locked it. It had sat in the sun all morning. The wheel was so hot it burned his hand. The interior was unbearable. Connors rolled down the windows and walked back to the cocktail lounge where he'd bought Eleana a gin buck.

Sheriff Thompson was sagging on one of the stools. His drunk was obviously progressive. He had trouble sitting

erect. Some of the film left his eyes as he saw Connors. "Well if it isn't my old friend Mr. Connors the bigshot detective story writer."

Macey explained, "Jimmy's drunk." The deputy looked worried.

"So I see," Connors said. He sat a few stools away.

"Not that I blame him much," Macey added. He included the barman in his scowl. "Me and Jimmy were both born here in Blue Mound. And just because we've lived here all our lives, the show fellows who run the town treat us like we're a pair of rubes."

"I wanna drink," Thompson hiccuped.

The barman hesitated and Macey said, "You heard him."

The barman shrugged and refilled Thompson's shot glass. Then he asked Connors, "What will yours be, Mister?"

Connors told him. "Beer."

Ignoring his drink, Thompson turned on his stool to scowl at Connors. "Bigshot ain't you?" It sounded like one word.

"I never made any such claim."

Thompson ignored the statement. It was doubtful he heard it. "But bigshot or not I'm going to throw your pants in the clink as soon as I hear from New York." He located his deputy with an effort. "Call the railroad station."

"I just called, Jimmy," his deputy assured him. "And Charlie says there's been no answer yet."

"Inefficient. Inefficient," Thompson said. "Wired 'em nine o'clock this morning." He lifted his shot glass to his lips and put it down. "Something damn funny going on. 'Minds me of the gag about the whore an' the guy with lace on his shorts. What I wanna know is who's doing what to who an' who's getting paid for it."

Macey kept glancing at the door. "Come on. Drink your drink and let's go. You gotta get some sleep and sober up. Be a good fellow, Jimmy. If Mr. Hayes sees you in this condition we'll both be out of a job."

Sheriff Thompson was luridly explicit about what Mr.

Hayes could do but he drank his drink and allowed his deputy to lead him out of the lounge.

Connors watched them leave. It had been in the back of his mind to blow the whole thing wide open and confide in Thompson. That was obviously out of the question. Sober, the sheriff was intelligent, if somewhat frustrated and dominated by John Hayes. Drunk, he was a moron.

The barman picked Thompson's glass from the bar and wiped up the spilled liquor. "A nice lad, Jimmy," he said. "But he pulls one of these about once a year. Feels he has to express himself, I guess. Then Mac getting killed last night has hit him hard. We all liked the old man."

"I'll buy a drink," Connors offered.

"Thanks. I'll go you a brew," the barman said. He drew himself a short beer then put it down as the phone at the front end of the bar rang. A moment later he turned back to Connors. "Your name is Connors, ain't it? Ad Connors?"

"It is."

The barman laid the receiver on the bar. "New York. Long distance. The operator says she's been calling you all over town and someone just told her they seen you come in here."

Connors walked up to the front of the bar and took the call. It was Shad. "You can talk?" the agent asked.

Connors glanced down the empty bar. "Within reason." Then he thought of the operator. If John Hayes had the sheriff, western union, and the railroad station, in his pocket it wasn't likely he'd overlooked the local phone exchange. "But I wouldn't mention any names if I were you." It was a good connection. Schaeffer might have been in the next room. He said, "Well, the same man I told you about came back just a few minutes ago and wanted to know if I'd seen you. Naturally I said no. Then he said they'd had a wire from, well, where you are now asking for information. And he said they've wired back a pick-up and hold while they refer the question to the Attorney General's office."

"Why the Attorney General?"

"Because now they aren't certain who has jurisdiction. They've never had a case just like it before. And they don't want to send a man out there until they've had a ruling."

"You contacted K?"

"I did."

"What did he say?"

"He says it's in our favor. He says he thinks this throws it back into the party of the first part's lap and they'll have to start all over if they want your company."

"I see," Connors said. "You got my wire?"

Shad said, "This morning. That's where I called, Hayes House. But when the maid said you'd gone into town I asked the operator to trace you." The agent's enthusiasm bubbled over. "Look, Ad. I've got more good news."

"Yes—?"

"While I can't state for a positive fact they're going to pick it up, one of the three judges who make the decision for one of the major book clubs read your book in manuscript form and called me this morning."

"Yes—?"

"And he said it was certain of one vote. He said it was one of the most powerful and concise pieces of writing he has ever read and we both should be proud of it. I told you, boy. We're in the Cinderella money now."

"I love you, Shad."

"Now I love *you*," Schaeffer said. "How are things going out there?"

"They stink," Connors admitted.

Some of Schaeffer's enthusiasm faded. "Well, keep me posted, boy."

"I'll do that, Shad," Connors said.

He hung up the receiver and went back to his beer. Damn John Hayes. Damn Donald Hayes. Damn Celeste Hayes. Damn Hayes Cottage. Damn Allan Lautenbach. Damn

Eleana. Right now after all these years of dropping sweat and talent in the slot just when he hit the jackpot something like this would have to happen.

Finished with his beer he picked his change from the bar, walked back to the borrowed car, and drove slowly out of town in the direction of Hayes Cottage. He slowed the car almost to a crawl just before he reached it. Celeste wasn't working in the garden. Neither was she sitting on the porch. All of the windows, including the second story front, were open but the front door was closed. Closed and locked, Connors imagined.

He drove on a few miles up the road and turned around in the driveway of a lane leading back to a farm house. Then he drove past the cottage again. There was still no life in the garden or the yard but this time he caught a flash of movement in the window.

Nearing Blue Mound he turned down a rutted lane that led past a fair grounds to the river. There was a huge oak tree on the bank of the river. Parking under it Connors sat watching an old man patiently training a three-gaited walking horse.

He supposed the thing to do was to go back to the cottage, bang on the door with the butt of his gun, and demand a showdown. Somehow he didn't feel equal to it. It was one thing to write about a man breaking in on a triple killer. It was another thing to do it.

He tried to bolster his ego. He didn't *know* the man in the room was Donald Hayes. Connors realized the palms of his hands were wet and wiped them on his thighs. If John Hayes was making a fool of him it could be John Hayes in the room. Hayes could have told Celeste the real reason for his being at Hayes House and sold her a bill of goods. Hayes could have convinced Celeste that, at this late date, it would do no good to have the truth come out. He could have convinced her it was better for still one more murder to be committed than to destroy Eleana's illusions and her plans to

marry Allan Lautenbach. Celeste approved of the marriage. Celeste loved Eleana. Mother love was as fierce as it was tender. In that case the wisp of smoke, Celeste's smeared lips, the trembling of her fingers, had been bait to lure him into a trap. If he walked into Hayes Cottage and was shot, after what happened at the hotel, even Eleana would think that her father had killed him. Hayes could take care of the local angle without any of the background of the story coming to Lautenbach's attention. Donald Hayes would still be a wanted man. And his and Eleana's Mexican 'interlude' would be wiped off the record.

The old man training the walking horse hitched her to a rail in shade. Then coming over to the tree under which Connors was parked he took a waterbag from one of its lower branches.

"Howdy." Recognition lighted his face. "Say. You're that—"

Connors finished the sentence for him. "Detective story writer, aren't you?"

The old man grinned. "Hear it on all sides, huh?"

His grin was infectious. Some of Connors' sour mood left him. "Well, at least this is one town in which I'm recognized."

The old man thrust his arm in the window. "Name's Carson. No relation to Kit. Mac was a great admirer of yours. Glad he got to meet you. The sheriff made any progress on who killed him?"

Connors said, "Thompson's drunk."

Carson didn't seem surprised. "It's about time for one of Jimmy's periodics. Jimmy's a good hand when the going is smooth but he's not much of a hand in a tight one. John Hayes has done his thinking for him so long that Jimmy's high up in the blues without a prayer whenever a big top blows down." The old man put a pinch of fine cut in his cheek.

Connors asked a flat question. "What sort of a man is John Hayes?"

Carson thought a moment. "I could say, salt of the earth. But John has his faults along with the rest of us. He's a good friend, a bad enemy. He'll go through hell and high water to make his point. But I feel sorry for John. I always have. The one thing he really wants he's never been able to get."

"And that is—?"

"His brother's wife. John's always loved her. Loved his brother, too. That's why Don doing what he did hit John so hard." Carson spat tobacco juice at a beetle zig-zagging through the dust. "You know though, Mr. Connors, there's always been one thing about that affair that puzzled me."

"You mean Don running away with Tamara?"

"Um hmm. Pretty little thing, Tamara. Shy, too. Not like most Gypsies. Of course through the years it's been talked about Tamara's been made out to be a little tart who'd slept with everyone on the lot before Don ran away with her. But you pin any of the old timers down and it's always some other gilly who'd bedded her. I don't think any of 'em ever did, except Don and her husband. But what I'm getting at is this."

"Yes?"

Carson spat at the beetle again and hit it this time. "Jennie Silvers was postmistress in those days. Her husband was station agent. Curious souls, both of them. And between 'em they had Western Union and the United States Mail sewed up. Now mind this. Don came home a full week before he was expected. If he'd wired Tamara to expect him, Silvers would have passed it on. If Don had written to Tamara, Jennie couldn't have waited to put a bee in Celeste's ear." The old man looked expectant. "See what I mean?"

"No," Connors admitted. "I'm afraid I don't."

Carson spat with the impatience of the aged. "Could be Mac was wrong about you. Sure you're a detective story

writer? Look. Don got in on the two o'clock milk train. Come in unexpected with neither John nor Celeste down to the station to meet him. The last Don was seen he was hoofing it down the road toward his cottage. To reach it he had to pass the shack in which Pablo and Tamara lived. So far, fine. But now tell me this. *How did Tamara know Don was coming?* How was Tamara alerted so she could get Pablo out of the way? Or did Don just turn in off the road and climb into her bed at two o'clock in the morning? That don't seem logical to me. He had to expect Pablo to be gone. And Pablo had to come back before he was due and catch Don in his saddle. Pablo going for a gun or a knife is the only reason for Don to have killed him. Don wasn't the sort of a man to go around sticking knives in people for fun."

"Pablo's body was found in the shack?"

"On the floor of the bedroom with one knife in his hand and another in his ribs. The sheets on the bed had been slashed. A wash bowl, a pitcher, a chair, even the chamber pot had been smashed. Oh, it was a hell of a mess. Although I remember remarking at the time about there being so little blood."

Connors sat looking at the river, sensing rather than hearing the ripple of the water as it cascaded over a small falls. And there it was. He knew who had killed Attorney Sanchez. He knew who had killed MacMillan. He knew who was waiting for him on the second floor of Hayes Cottage. Keeping his voice casual, he asked, "Who found the body?"

Carson said, "John. The next morning. Along with doing a knife act, Pablo handled the rigging for Tamara's high-wire act and John wanted to see him about some new guy wires he was figuring on buying as soon as Don came back with the money."

"I see," Carson said. He felt his way. "Say. Along the same line. MacMillan told me something the other evening just before he was killed, something I've thought of a dozen

times. Were you with the show the night it was making a long jump and the canvas boss dropped the side walls of Celeste's tent before she'd finished dressing?"

"I was." Carson's aged eyes lighted at the memory. "It was one of the prettiest things I ever saw. And I never did hold Celeste was bitchy about it like Don accused her. Well, not very bitchy. She was young. She was pretty. She knew it. She knew what the sight of her body was doing to every man within eyesight. Being a woman, it pleased her. If I'd been a woman the knowledge would have pleased me. Believe me, Mr. Connors, it was beautiful. What with the night and the wind and the glare of the work lights and the whinnying of the horses and the snarling and cough of the cats and the trumpeting of the elephants it was like being present at the Creation. After that side wall hit the ground, and before Celeste put on her wrapper, every man present felt like Adam must have felt the first time he knew Eve."

"John Hayes was in the crowd?"

"He was. John raised hob with Don after Don blacked Celeste's eye and called her a little bitch. John said there was nothing bitchy about it, that Celeste had carried off an embarrassing situation well. And John said if Don ever laid a hand on her again, brother or no, he'd—kill him." The old man's voice trailed off like the final ticks of an unwound clock. His eyes looked sunken and worried. "Well," he said finally. "Well," he pushed himself away from the car, "I guess I'd better get back to my training."

Connors sat a moment longer watching the old man. Then he drove on into Blue Mound.

The west side of the street was shady now. There were more people on the street, more cars and farm trucks at the curb. He parked in front of the drug store and went in. The pharmacist was putting up a prescription. The soda clerk was washing glasses. Two high school girls were sitting at the counter giggling over their chocolate malted milks.

Connors got change for a quarter from the soda jerk, then, walking back to the phone booth he dropped a nickle in the coin slot and gave the operator the number of Hayes House.

"This is Connors calling," he told the maid who answered. "Has Miss Hayes returned yet?"

"No she has not," the maid said.

"Is Mr. Hayes there?"

"No. He isn't here either. I'm sorry."

"It's quite all right," Connors said. "But would you take a message for Mr. Hayes. Tell him I'm driving into St. Louis on a matter concerning the business we discussed in his office this morning and I won't be at the house for supper. It may be quite late before I return. Possibly not until tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir. I'll tell him, Mr. Connors," the maid said.

Connors continued to face the phone after he'd hung up the receiver. At this point, in a pulp story of his, his hero would turn to find the guilty party eying him with a murderous gleam over the barrel of a revolver.

Connors turned and looked through the glass. The status quo hadn't changed. There was no one in the drug store but himself, the pharmacist, the soda jerk, and the two high school girls giggling over their glasses of chocolate malted milk.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It had been hot too long. It had to rain. It did. Leaving the florist shop next to the hotel, Connors drove out the road to Hayes House. It was a few minutes after nine when he parked his car a few hundred feet beyond the stone gates and walked through the grounds to the house. His clothes were sodden by the time he'd gone twenty feet. Rain cascaded from the brim of his hat. It beaded on his cheeks and

the backs of his hands. He liked the feel of it. It was cool and soft and clean.

There were four cars in front of the house. John Hayes' Lincoln sedan. Allan Lautenbach's imported Jaguar. Eleana's new Buick convertible. A '39 Plymouth coupe.

The French windows that opened on the lawn were partly closed against the rain. Standing back of a small blue spruce, Connors watched the family at supper.

The scene was much as it had been the night before. Lautenbach was doing the talking. Celeste pretended interest. Eleana was candidly bored and seemingly worried about something. She touched her lips, her forehead, ran her hand over her hair. John Hayes was equally as jumpy. He divided his attention between Celeste and the partly opened windows. Once he got up and opened them a little wider. There was still a bulge on the left side of his coat.

Leaving the vantage point of the spruce, Connors crossed thirty feet of wet lawn and stood with his back against the house next to the first French window. In his new position he could hear but not see. Lautenbach was still talking.

"A dirty old hole, Monte Carlo. Hardly worth bothering about, especially since the war. Oh, of course we'll drop in. But most of the crowd goes to Biarritz. That is, the crowd we'll travel with."

Eleana's voice sounded as if she was wrestling with some knotty problem. "What did you do in the war, Allan?"

Lautenbach seemed surprised by the question. "Why, worked with father, of course. You know, gave parties for the right people in Washington. Snagged our share of Army and Navy contracts. Helped keep the boys well fed."

"Oh," Eleana said flatly.

Careful, honey, Connors thought. Don't get thinking thoughts like that. You're going to marry the guy. Remember?

Celeste broke the awkward silence that followed with a

pleased exclamation. "Oh. Walt Disney's new picture is at the Playhouse. In Technicolor. Would you like to see it, Eleana?"

"No, mother," Eleana said. A chair scraped on the parquet flooring. "If you'll excuse me, Allan, I think I'll go up to my room. The swim, or the drinks, or the rain, or something, has given me a headache. You don't mind awfully, do you, if we don't go out to the Barn tonight?"

There was the scrape of a second chair. "Not at all, Eleana. You go up and rest." Lautenbach laughed. "And don't worry about me. I'll drive out to the Barn alone later on and give the tables another whirl." He added, probably to John Hayes. "Did quite well out there last night. Eleana lost a few dollars but I came away with almost two thousand."

Hayes spoke for the first time since Connors had taken up his listening post. "I'll have to speak to Mickey. If you won, he let you win. He must be building you up for a killing. Mickey used to be the crookedest three-card monte man in the business. I'll bet I've run him off my lot a dozen times."

Lautenbach laughed. "It's only money."

Eleana said, "Good night, mother. Good night, Uncle John. Good night, Allan."

There was a brief pause between each good night and Connors could visualize Eleana kissing each in turn. When she came to Lautenbach his stomach turned over. Love was indecent. What it did shouldn't happen to a man.

After Eleana had left the room, Celeste asked, "How about you, John? Would you like to see a movie?"

Hayes sounded tired. "No. Not tonight. But I have to drive back to town to take care of some unfinished business and you're welcome to ride in with me."

"That," Celeste said, "will not be necessary." Her French accent was pronounced tonight. "When Allan and Eleana picked me up at the cottage this afternoon I had them stop at the garage to see if my car was ready, and it was. All it

needed was new pistol rings, or something." She added with French thrift. "That is why it burned so much oil. Now we shall see."

Lautenbach laughed again. "You're charming, Mrs. Hayes. If I wasn't in love with your daughter, I think I'd fall in love with you."

"Shall," John Hayes asked, "we go into the living room?"

Connors walked back through the rain to his car. He knew what he wanted to know; where the occupants of Hayes House would be for the next few hours. At least where they proposed to be.

As he drove through Blue Mound he saw a light in Sheriff Thompson's office. Thompson's feet were on the floor. He was apparently sober and still waiting for the wire that had been sent and John Hayes had ordered the station agent to bring to the bank.

The windows of Hayes Cottage were closed except for a two inch crack between sill and frame of the front second story window. The shade on the window was drawn but the light seeping out around the edges of the shade could only come from a lighted oil lamp.

The light puzzled Connors. Then he thought he understood. The problem he presented had to be disposed of tonight—or never. When Sheriff Thompson didn't acknowledge the answer to his wire, the D.A.'s office in New York would inquire into the matter. They might even send a man to Blue Mound.

Connors drove a quarter of a mile past the cottage. Then he parked just off the road and slogged back through the rain. There was no need of striving for silence. The rain drowned out all sound but its own.

Reaching the cottage he stood a moment in the shelter of the stoop to get his breath and to allow the rain to drain from his hat before he tried the front door. It was locked and the key was no longer under the mat. More bait, he supposed. Make it difficult for the fly to walk into the spider's

parlor. A fly wouldn't expect a triple killer to leave his front door unlocked.

Rounding the house, Connors found an unlocked kitchen window. Opening the window he pulled himself up and sat on the sill until his eyes became accustomed to the even darker interior.

The kitchen had a dry and unused smell. There was a table under the window. Connors eased his weight onto it. Then, sitting on the table he took off his wet shoes before stepping down to the floor. There was always the chance he was wrong and Donald Hayes was waiting for him in the lighted room.

The rain heard from inside the house was louder than it had been out in the night. It beat in angry frenzy on the roof, pounded against the clapboards, and gurgled noisily down the tin rain spouts.

Connors tried to light a match but both the book and his hand were wet. He threw the matches away and took the revolver from his pocket. It didn't matter if it was wet.

The kitchen opened into a small dining room. The dining room opened into a parlor. The yellow runner laid down by the lamp in the upstairs bedroom gave sufficient light for Connors to see the appointments of the parlor. The furniture was well-chosen. The chairs looked comfortable. The magazines he could see were yellowed copies of *Billboard*, *Variety*, and *Field and Stream*. A battered Teddy bear, undoubtedly Eleana's, sat in a small red rocking chair with one fuzzy arm around a girl doll. A lump formed in Connors' throat. Celeste had kept the parlor exactly as it must have been on that night twenty years before.

He walked to the foot of the stairs and listened. There was no sound on the floor above but the pound of the rain on the roof. He put tentative weight on a step. The stairs were well built. They didn't creak. It might have been better if the carpenter hadn't been so thorough.

Keeping close to the rail he climbed the stairs and stood

in a small upper hall. Two bedrooms opened off it. The doors to both rooms were open. There was a small bed in the back bedroom and a mate to the red rocking chair.

The lamp in the front room was on a table, just inside the door. There was a double bed on the opposite wall and a night table in front of the window holding a butt-littered ash tray and a Bible. The bed was made but there was the outline left by a body on the spread and the spread was deeply indented where it covered the pillows.

Connors examined the butts in the ash tray. Half of them were smeared with lipstick. Through the open curtains of a closet alcove Connors could see a row of men's suits. Donald Hayes hadn't had time to pack as thoroughly as Tamara.

He sat on the bed and picked up the Bible. It was old and often used. It fell open in his hand to Genesis IV. The verses VIII, IX, and X were smudged as if they had been traced many times by a moving finger. Connors laid the revolver on the bed and read the verses:

VIII And Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

IX And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not. Am I my brother's keeper?

X And He said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.

Connor laid the Bible back on the table and picked up the revolver. Then, too nervous to sit still, he got up and prowled the small room, looking out into the hall from time to time to make certain no one was ascending the stairs.

He found the bundle of letters in the bottom drawer of

the dressing table. They were tied with a blue ribbon and they made him think of the carbon copy of KILL ME, MAMMAMA that Eleana had kept.

"Let's say a souvenir. Something tied with blue."

Connors sat back on the bed and slipped the ribbon from the letters. The first one he read was a letter that Donald Hayes had written to Celeste shortly after they had been married. The writing was bold and masculine. The handwriting looked the same as that of the letter John Hayes had shown him in the bank.

Connors laid it on the bed and read another letter. It had been written the night after Eleana had been born. In it Donald Hayes laid bare his soul and hopes for his wife and baby daughter. Both letters were well-spotted with tear stains.

Connors laid the second letter on the first and was reaching for the third when he thought he heard a door open and close. Picking up the revolver he walked out into the hall, then, cautiously, down the stairs.

There was a sweet, fresh smell in the parlor but the front door was still locked and closed. There was no one in the parlor. His hair ends tingling, Connors walked back through the dark dining room to the kitchen. There was no one in either room. The sound he'd thought he'd heard had been due to his nerves. Breathing hard, Connors returned to the upstairs front bedroom.

The next two letters were inconsequential. They touched on nothing with which he was concerned or familiar. The eleventh and next to the last letter was an abject apology for having so lost his temper as to strike Celeste and pleading with her to forgive him. It was written on Oklahoma City hotel stationery but as there was no postmark or stamp on the envelope, Connors concluded that Donald Hayes had either slipped it under the door of his wife's hotel room or left it on her dressing table on the circus lot. As the other letters it, too, was spotted with tear stains.

Connors put it with the letters he'd already read and picked up the last letter. It was written on Biltmore Hotel stationery and the envelope was stamped and postmarked Los Angeles, Feb. 16, 1931. Connors slipped the letter from the envelope and read it. It began on a cheerful note—

Sweetheart:

It looks like it's in the bag. I had lunch with McGivney at the Hollywood Brown Derby this afternoon and he seemed very favorably impressed with our collateral . . .

The letter went on to discuss the proposed mortgage and the amount of interest he and John would have to pay. Then Donald Hayes began to generalize. It was his first trip to California. He was impressed by a number of things and he described them in detail to Celeste. There was a trip to one of the movie studios, a fishing jaunt to Catalina, an evening spent in China Town and on Olivera Street. He'd been to the Hollywood Bowl. He'd rented a car and driven out to Thousand Oaks to see old circus friends. The last trip had impressed him the most. He wrote glowingly of the small towns along Ventura Boulevard and of the film celebrities who were beginning to purchase small ranches in and near Sherman Oaks, Encino, and Tarzana. Hayes was particularly impressed by the California flora.

I want you to see this country, Celeste. It's all mountains and valleys, green now for this is their summer. I drove past miles and miles of climbing red roses and flowering eucalyptus and acacia trees. There is also a species of yellow poppy peculiar to this region, but which I am assured will grow anywhere the soil and climate is favorable. One of our friends was in Thousand Oaks, Jim Kelly. (You remember Jim. We met him at the Muehlebach in Kansas City. He was out ahead of Ringling Brothers and

kidded me about trying to cut into their take.) Well, anyway, Jim's wife has given me a small packet of poppy seeds to try in our garden. I have it in my pocket now. And Jim says if they grow he'll see what he can do about sending us a seedling eucalyptus and acacia.

Connors re-read the paragraph then pushed his wet hat back on his head and sat holding the letter in his hands. There it was. There it had been all these years for all of Blue Mound to see. And not a soul in Blue Mound had been the wiser.

The pelt of the rain increased in intensity. Connors started to lay the letter with the others and got to his feet instead. This time it wasn't his nerves. And the sound hadn't been outside the house. There had been a distinct thump, then the sound of heavy china-ware shattering. Jamming the letter in his pocket, Connors picked the lamp from the table and walked to the head of the stairwell. At the end of the yellow runner laid down by the lamp lay a heavy shattered china pitcher that hadn't been there before.

Taking a firmer grip on the revolver and holding the lamp the length of his arm from his body, Connors stepped down one stair. Then a rush from behind knocked the lamp from his hand before he could turn and a short length of heavy pipe began to batter his head with blinding, murderous blows.

The revolver followed the lamp. The first sound he'd heard had been real. It had been the killer of Pablo, Sanchez, and MacMillan, entering the front door. Seeing him start down the stairs the first time, the killer had hidden behind a chair or perhaps the parlor drapes. Then when he'd gone on into the dining room and kitchen, the killer had climbed the stairs to wait in what had once been Eleana's room.

A red tongue of flame from the dropped lamp crawled

across the floor and licked at one of the parlor drapes. Blinded with blood, stunned by the suddenness and fury of the attack, Connors turned on the stairs in a sub-conscious attempt to grapple with his attacker and knew a moment of intense sadness. He had been right after all. The bare flesh under his hands was soft and yielding. Donald Hayes was dead. He had been dead for twenty years. And if John Hayes was wielding the length of pipe that was beating him to his knees the poohbah of Blue Mound had suddenly grown breasts.

They held Connors' fast-numbing fingers like magnets. They were bare, wet, firm, familiar breasts. Breasts for a man to dream on. Breasts like Eve might have had.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The cottage vented by the open front door burned rapidly. It was his constant coughing that roused Connors to consciousness. He was lying face down on the landing. Clouds of black smoke were billowing up the stairs. The parlor was one large flame. The heat was already intense but the air a few inches from the floor was still pure.

Connors backed the length of the hall and into the room that had been Eleana's. Before he reached it the flames were licking the stairhead. In another few minutes the inferno on the lower floor would eat away a supporting wall. When that happened the second floor would fall into the first. Holding his breath, Connors got to his feet and tried to open the window. The lock was stiff. The window stuck. Then it slid up.

The added ventilation gave impetus to the flames. The crackling became a roar. There was a screen on the outside of the window. Connors kicked it out. Then he was astraddle of the sill with the rain pelting at his head and shoulders.

Connors twisted in the window and dropped. A lilac bush cushioned his fall. As he struck the earth he rolled away from the house. Fifteen feet from the building he got to his hands and knees and crawled, sucking in great lungfuls of fresh air, until the wet darkness covered him. Then he lay with a cheek pressed to the wet earth looking back through the rain at the burning cottage.

Flames were leaping through the window out of which he'd dropped, licking up at the leaf-filled gutter and setting the eaves afire. As he watched, fire bored through the roof in three places and fought the rain for the shingles. Then the front wall of the cottage fell in and the roof fell into the flames and the matter was decided.

Somewhere out on the road, Connors heard the whine of a car starter and lifted his head an inch. A motor turned over stiffly, caught. There was a grind of gears. A pair of car headlights flicked on and moved rapidly in the direction of Blue Mound.

Connors turned over on his back and let the rain wash his face until he felt strong enough to get to his feet. When he did, he found he was standing in Celeste's flower garden. Stooping, he snapped the stem of a poppy. Then, chewing on the stem, he limped through the rain to his car.

The fire siren in Blue Mound was wailing now. Wailing, Connors thought grimly, twenty years too late.

When he reached Hayes House, the Lincoln and the Buick were standing on the drive. The Jaguar and the Plymouth were gone. Parking his borrowed car, Connors walked through the huge living room and up the stairs to his room, meeting no one en route.

In his room he switched on the lights and stripped off his sodden clothes. Then picking a pair of clean shorts from his bag he padded on into the bathroom wondering where he was going to get a pair of shoes. He'd only brought the one pair with him. And they'd burned up with Hayes Cottage.

Closing the bathroom door, Connors examined his face in

the mirror. The length of pipe had done more damage than he'd realized. There was a nasty gash on his right temple. Despite the pelt of the rain his hair was still matted with blood. Only the fact he'd been wearing his hat had kept the damage as relatively minor as it was.

He adjusted the shower to lukewarm and washed the blood from his hair as best he could. Then, through the closed door of the bathroom, he heard the room door open and snick shut and the sick feeling returned to the pit of Connors' stomach. He hadn't been smart in returning to Hayes House. He'd been dumb. He'd been seen crawling away from the cottage. He'd asked for it. And now he was going to get it.

Then Eleana called through the closed door. "Is that you in the bathroom, Ad?"

Connors leaned against the tile wall. "Yes. Why?"

"I want to talk to you," Eleana said. She waited a moment, then added, "I thought I heard you come up the stairs." Her voice sounded as if she'd been crying. "I—I've been waiting for you for hours. Where did you go, Ad?"

Connors put on his shorts. "What's it to you?"

Eleana said, "A lot. Please. Come out, Ad. I want to talk to you."

Connors towed the hair on his chest. "One last oat, eh? Well, I'm sorry, baby. The boat sailed in Nuevo Laredo."

"No," Eleana wailed. She hadn't been crying. She was. "No. Please, Ad. Don't be mean to me. I was wrong. I admit it."

Connors leaned against his side of the door. "You were wrong about what?"

"Us. Allan," Eleana drawled. "I can't marry him. I won't."

"And when did you come to this decision?"

"This afternoon. Tonight. At supper. I almost died when you didn't show up. I thought maybe you were never coming back." Eleana sounded as if she was standing with her cheek

pressed to the door. "I will die if you ever leave me again. I love you, Ad. Hear me? I love you."

"Oh. I thought it was all bio-chemical affinity."

Eleana sniffed. "That helps. But there's more to it than that."

"Now you tell me," Connors grinned. "How about the Lautenbach money?"

"I don't care," Eleana said. "Mother had her life. I'm sorry it was tragic. I'm willing to do anything I can for her." Eleana was emphatic about it. "But I'm going to marry you."

"That's a proposal?"

"It is."

"I love you, baby," Connors said. "I think I have since I saw you standing in the intersection of Tacuba and Teatro Nacional."

Eleana was practical. "Then come out here and kiss me."

Connors opened the door and Eleana came into his arms. Then she saw his face and backed a step. For a moment he was afraid that she was going to scream. Then her voice fiercely possessive, she demanded, "Who did this to you, Ad?"

Connors kissed her gently. There was no heat, no passion in her lips. Even spiced with the salt of her tears they were sweet and clinging and a promise. This was the kiss with which they should have started.

Connors held her close for a long time. When he spoke his voice was as gentle as his love. "You'll have to know in a few minutes, Eleana. But to save me telling an unpleasant story twice, would you mind waiting until I dress? Then we'll go look up your uncle."

Eleana raised her eyes to his. "It was Uncle John who had this done to you?"

"No," Connors said. "It wasn't. I did John Hayes an injustice. He's everything you said he was." Connors picked his rain sodden coat from the floor and transferred the letter

to his other coat. Then he put on a clean shirt and the suit he'd worn into Blue Mound.

"Where are your shoes?" Eleana asked.

"They're part of the story," Connors said. Dressed, he walked Eleana down the hall to John Hayes' door.

Connors was lifting his fist to knock when Hayes opened the door. He saw Eleana and said, curtly, "You'd better slip out of that negligee, put on a dress, and come with me, Eleana. The incompetent fools. They let it burn to the ground. And then they call me."

"Let what burn to the ground?" Eleana asked.

Connors told her. "Your mother's cottage."

Seeing him, Hayes stopped struggling into his coat. "Oh. You're back." He looked at the younger man's face and the lines in his own face deepened. "Don or a truck?" he asked.

The rain was distant here. It was merely a patter on the thick slate roof. The silence on the three-sided balcony deepened. Then Connors said, quietly, "Neither. Your brother Don is dead, Mr. Hayes. He's been dead since the night he returned to Blue Mound from California."

Eleana's fingers bit into Connors' arm. "How do you know? How do you know it was Hayes Cottage that burned?"

"I just came from there," Connors said. "The shoes you inquired about are still there. I imagine they burned with the cottage."

John Hayes took a cigar from his pocket, rolled it between his fingers, then crumpled it in his palm. "You can prove my brother is dead? That Don has been dead for the length of time you say?"

"I can."

John Hayes looked at his clenched right fist. Then he opened his lean, hard fingers and allowed the crushed tobacco to trickle to the carpet. "I was afraid of that," he said finally. "I've been afraid of it for some years." Squaring his

shoulders, he pushed open the door to his room. "Come in. Come in, please, Mr. Connors."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

John Hayes put down his glass as the car stopped on the drive.

Eleana said, "It's mother." She allowed the drape to resume its fold and sat in a chair by the fireplace.

Celeste brought a breath of fresh air with her. A few jewels of rain had fallen in her hair. She brushed the moisture from her palms then came directly to John Hayes. "I've bad news for you, John," she said. "They called me out of the theatre to tell me Hayes Cottage had burned. There is nothing left but rubble."

Hayes looked at his dead cigar.

A bit impatient with him, Celeste said, "Well, why don't you say something, John? You know what the cottage meant to me." Celeste looked at Eleana. "You and your uncle have been quarreling?"

"No," said Eleana. "We haven't been quarreling." She might have been speaking to a stranger.

Celeste was hurt. "Eleana." She removed her transparent rain-cape and turning to lay it on a bench, saw Connors and all of her brightness left her. "Oh," Celeste moaned. "I see."

She passed her fingertips over her face and weaved as if she was about to faint. John Hayes got to his feet and steadied her. "You should have told me, Celeste. You should have allowed me to help you." He guided her to a chair and filled a wine glass with brandy.

Celeste shook her head at the glass. "No thank you. I'm glad," she told Connors. "I'm glad. You won't believe it, Mr. Connors." Her smile reflected her inner sickness. "Neither will Eleana. Loving you, she hates me. That is as it should

be. But I'm glad, very glad to see you. I'm glad you got out of the cottage."

Then Celeste put her face in her hands and rocked her shame. "These awful things I have done."

"You killed Don, too, Celeste?" The question came from Hayes.

Celeste raised her eyes to his. "Yes. I think you could say I did, John. I have always considered it so although it was not my hand that used the knife." She drank the brandy she'd refused. "But how did you know, Mr. Connors? That is what has worried me the most. That is why I make no futile attempt at denial. It all had to come out sometime, I suppose."

"I didn't know," Connors admitted. "If you're referring to the story I wrote in Guadalajara based on what Eleana told me, I merely transposed the motivation because it seemed truer to life that way."

"I almost died when I read it," Celeste said. "I have wished I might die so many times." She passed her fingers over her face again. "Of course, in your story, you made John my lover." She patted John Hayes' arm. "I have often wished for that, too. I am bad, no?"

"No," Hayes said loyally.

Celeste looked at Connors. "So it was just a story. I thought you knew. When you called from the hotel and asked to speak to Eleana, I was certain." She spread her hands in a futile gesture. "And I had no money to buy your silence. No money left at all. So, to cover my old sin I did what I thought best."

Hayes knelt beside the chair in which Celeste was sitting. "It was you who shot Mac, Celeste?"

She nodded. "When I went for the flowers for the table. I knew about the fire escape. I knew the gun was in the closet. I thought MacMillan was Mr. Connors. And when I saw it wasn't, I couldn't undo what I'd done."

Hayes' voice was surprisingly gentle. "I followed you. I

followed you, too, Connors. I was the man you thought was Don. That's why I was almost certain he wasn't in town. Still there was the possibility."

"You knew it was I who killed MacMillan," Celeste puzzled. "Still you said nothing, John?"

Hayes shook his head. "No. I didn't know until you just told me, Celeste. I merely wondered why a call from the man with whom Eleana had been romancing in Mexico should so upset you. But when I saw Connors go into the hotel and you go into the florist, I damned myself for a jealous fool and drove back here to Hayes House just in time to drive Eleana to Blue Mound."

"I took the roses up to the room with me," Celeste said. "I am very sorry about Mac. I am very sorry about it all. I have caused you all much trouble and much heartache."

Connors studied Celeste's face. She was sane in the legal definition of the word but years of emotional upset and physical self-denial had eaten away the foundation of her emotional balance and conditioned her to act on impulse.

"But why try to kill Ad?" Eleana demanded of her mother.

"He knew," Celeste said. "Oh, maybe not at first. Maybe at first it was just a story. But he knew. And I knew he knew when John stopped at the cottage this morning and told me he was looking for Don, told me he'd shown Mr. Connors the letter in Don's handwriting that it took me so long to write."

Celeste was silent a moment. Then she continued. "So, when you came with Eleana, Mr. Connors, I set a trap for you. A small one. I smeared my lipstick. I left a lighted cigarette on a tray. I acted nervous. And it worked. While I waited this afternoon I saw you drive by twice and knew you would come tonight." Celeste smiled wanly. "I am a good actress. No?"

"Yes. You're a good actress," Connors said.

Eleana accused, "You tried to kill Ad to hush up the past so I could marry the Lautenbach money."

"No." Celeste shook her head. "The money didn't enter my mind. Many men have wanted me. Several of them wealthy. One had almost as much as Allan Lautenbach." The strain in her eyes crept into her voice. "But except on two occasions when it was forced on me by circumstance, outside of the one time, I have always been true in mind and body to your father. Poof. That for Allan. Remember? It was you who were determined to marry him. It was you who insisted on going to Mexico to talk to your father and obtain our marriage license." There was a note of hysteria in her laughter. "I tried to dissuade you. Remember? I begged you not to go."

Eleana looked at the floor.

Celeste continued, "Knowing Caesar, I knew what would happen. He'd taken all the money I had. It cost me a hundred dollars every month for the fifty I sent you. It cost me ten thousand dollars to have him send five thousand dollars to your Uncle John." Celeste spread her hands. "And there is the money for which your father mortgaged the circus, plus what I made singing, selling corsets and cosmetics, waiting table. I, Celeste, who had been an equestrian star. I was in a trap and I couldn't get out." She wanted confirmation of the one thing in her life that had been beautiful. "I could ride, couldn't I, John?"

Hayes steadied her with his arm. "You were beautiful on a horse."

Celeste's smile faded. "I never rode again." It wasn't a plea for sympathy. It was a simple statement of fact. "I think I died with your father, Eleana. This is only a shell that lived on. Of course, when you were young there was you to care for. But once you were grown, I would gladly have gone. Then you met Allan Lautenbach and it started all over again."

Celeste asked if she might have another glass of brandy. Sipping it, she confided:

"The day you left I called Caesar and asked him to meet

me somewhere in Mexico. Anywhere out of Mexico City. It was he who suggested Uruapan."

"Ah," Connors said. "The beautiful veiled *señora*."

Looking at Eleana, Celeste said, "I pleaded with Caesar. I gave myself to him. He took me and laughed. He was always greedy that one. He wanted more money. Whether your father and I were married was unimportant. He knew how your father died. I had to tell him that first night in Mexico City before he would agree to do what I wished him to, keep Donald alive through money sent to you. And he meant to use that knowledge after you were married to Allan. He even boasted he would possess you, that you would be afraid to deny him for fear of losing so many millions." Celeste's eyes flashed. "For that, I killed him."

"I had no idea you were in the Morelas. I did not then know this business about a General Estaban. I do not know it now except what I have overheard whispered between the three of you. I'm sorry, my child, if I have cursed you with my passion. I had hoped you might be cold. Such women are much more happy. Not so much happens in their lives to tear their hearts and bodies to pieces." Celeste smiled wryly at Connors. "But perhaps Mr. Connors can resolve that problem for you."

"I'm certain he can," Eleana said coldly. "There's never going to be any other man in my life, Ad."

Celeste handed the brandy glass to Hayes and wiped her fingers on the handkerchief he offered. "I thought that once about your father. I meant it to be that way. See that you keep that pledge, my child. Good is like a stone thrown in the water of the river. The ripples spread out from it until there is no end and everything they touch is benefited. Evil is the same way. Starting with one mistake, the ripples befoul everything with which they come in contact. So it was with me and Pablo."

Celeste wiped hot tears from her eyes. "It all started, I suppose, that night Spike Mallen dropped the side walls of

my dressing tent and caught me *au naturel*. I was embarrassed but also, I suppose, what it pleased Don to call "bitchy." There were so many men staring. All had but one thought. It made me drunk with power. It made me realize that within me I had the source of life. I passed it off with a laugh and a remark. And then Don called me the name and struck me and John told Don he would kill him if he ever struck me again."

Celeste leaned her head on John Hayes' shoulder and cried. "I'm sorry, John. I didn't mean to cause his death. I loved him, too." She sat up and wiped her eyes. "Women are so full of tears. And tears are such futile things. I forgave Don, naturally. I loved him. But in the back of my mind was the thought he once had been mean to me." Celeste shrugged her exquisite shoulders. "And that's how Pablo happened. In my right mind I detested him. But he was a man. Don had gone to California to raise money for the show. I'd begged him to take me with him. But he insisted we couldn't afford it. And there he was in California and I was home doing housework, taking care of our child. All I had of interesting places, I had to get from his letters. All I knew was resentment. I didn't expect him for a week. And that night Pablo came to the house on some minor matter. I've often tried to remember what it was. I can't. But it must have been about a snake."

Celeste looked at Eleana. "I'd just put you to bed. I was sitting in the kitchen when Pablo knocked on the door. He came in and took off his hat and stated his errand. I had to pass him to get whatever it was he'd come for. And as I passed him he touched me, there, deliberately. I tried to slap him and couldn't. As much as I detested him the pressure of his hand paralyzed me with desire. Then he had me in his arms and was kissing my lips, my neck, my breasts, whispering how beautiful I had been in the work light and how he had wanted me ever since. I was young. Don had been gone a month. In the back of my mind, I suppose, there was

the idea of being even with Don for striking me. I let Pablo have his desire. And after that time lost all meaning. There was no right. There was no wrong. There was only a red sea of passion and a trumpeting of distant bugles in my ears. I was Eve at the birth of Creation. I was Jezebel and Messalina. I was the mother of all whores. I was Woman. Not all the men in the world could have fulfilled my needs that night."

Celeste gripped John Hayes' hand for support. "I didn't even hear Don on the stairs. He walked into our bedroom and found us, Pablo and me. There was a gun in the vanity drawer. Don meant to shoot us both, I think. But when he turned to get the gun Pablo leaped from the bed, snatched his knife from his clothes, and stabbed him."

Celeste was past tears now. It was a recital of fact. "Then Pablo laid the bloody knife on the table and stood there, panting. When I realized what had happened, I picked up the knife and served Pablo in a different manner."

"All the fire was gone. The roaring had died away. I was alone with two dead men, one of whom I loved. I sat on the bed for hours. I didn't know what to do. Then I dressed and drove Pablo's car down the road and told Tamara. I think I hoped she might kill me. She didn't. She drove back to the cottage with me and spat in Pablo's face. Then she suggested, for Eleana's sake, that I take him to their place and she would go away. But she wouldn't help me. I had to dress Pablo and drag him to their car. Don's wallet had fallen from his coat. I tried to give Tamara money and I thought she was going to spit on me. Then she did what was done to their bedroom and drove away. I never saw her again." Celeste looked at Connors. "Someone described that bedroom to you, didn't they? That was one of the reasons why you knew."

Unable to speak, Connors nodded.

"Then I walked home," Celeste continued. "You were crying, Eleana. You wanted a drink of water. I got it for you.

Then I went back in the bedroom with Don. I still wasn't thinking clearly. I had some wild idea if I buried Don in the garden I could keep him with me always. And I did. But Mac and some of the boys had seen him come in at the station. And the next morning when John found Pablo and it was discovered Tamara was gone, all the evil minds in town jumped to the wrong conclusion and I wasn't blamed at all. You never knew. You never suspected, did you, John?"

Hayes shook his head. "Not for years. Then it was only a wonder. The steady fifty a month wasn't like Don. If he'd made good in Mexico, he'd have sent Eleana thousands. If he'd pooped out, there'd have been no fifty. Then there was the letter with the money in it for me. The letter that came so opportunely. Just when I was threatening to go to Mexico and look Don up. Then once in a while it was the way you looked at me. I was tempted to believe you loved me and the reason you wouldn't have me was because there was some wall between us you couldn't, or wouldn't, explain."

Celeste put her hand in his. "I have loved you a long time, John. I loved you when I married Don. It was just I loved him more. But while I could and did betray the living, I couldn't bring myself to be faithless to the dead." Her voice barely audible, Celeste added, "Except on two occasions with Caesar A. Santchez. Once when I arranged to have the money sent. And in Uruapan when I killed him. I couldn't give the money to you without telling you what had happened. I couldn't do that. And then after I'd made the deal with Caesar, there was no turning back."

Connors asked, "How did you first contact Santchez?"

Celeste shrugged. "I was selling cosmetics then. One of my trips took me to Laredo. While I was there I thought of this thing of sending money for Eleana's care. So I went on down to Mexico City and asked a man at the consulate to recommend a Mexican lawyer who spoke either English or French. He recommended Attorney Santchez. The man said Caesar was a smart lawyer. And he was. He got the truth

out of me and has lived well all these years on Don's money. Even then it might never have come out if Eleana hadn't insisted on trying to obtain the license I buried with Don. I might have known though. I might have known when the poppy seeds Don had in his pocket that night began to blossom." She cried for a moment or two. "It was Don telling me he forgave me. It was Don trying to warn me."

Celeste got up and walked across the room and back.

Connors cleared up the last detail. "And the locket that Eleana and I saw in Santchez's hand? You put it there?"

Celeste shook her head. "No. I tried to take it away from him. Don hadn't worn it when he'd gone to California. He was wearing a new wrist watch I'd given him for Christmas and his old watch and chain were in my purse that first time I went to Mexico. And Caesar took them away from me and had worn them ever since. He said he wanted to remember his *Norte Americano* goose." Celeste turned to Hayes. "Well, you'd better call Sheriff Thompson, John."

Hayes was still kneeling by the chair in which Celeste had been sitting. He got to his feet and looked thoughtfully at Connors.

Celeste bared enough of her shoulder and the round of her right breast to reveal an ugly purple bruise. "I carry the proof on my body it was I who shot Mr. MacMillan. I admit to burning the cottage and the attempt on Mr. Connors' life. Oh, I was so clever there. I went to see a movie. Right through the front door and out a fire door. And I took off my clothes in the car when I reached the cottage so I wouldn't leave any clue or get them spotted with blood. Killing three times makes you so wise. Then the lamp fell from Mr. Connors' hand and set the cottage on fire. And I was frightened and fled and didn't do as good a job as I did on the others." Celeste buried her face in John Hayes' shoulder and sobbed, "Well, why don't you call Sheriff Thompson? I confess. I caused Donald to die. I killed Pablo and Caesar and MacMillan. I am a bad woman. I must be punished."

Hayes stroked her convulsing shoulders and looked over Celeste's head at Connors. The indecision was gone from his face. He was a man with a plan. "Would you consider giving us a forty-eight hour start?" he asked.

Connors shook his head. "You're crazy to think of it, Hayes. You can't get her away."

"I can try. There's an international airport in St. Louis. And in forty-eight hours we can be a long way from here."

"Possibly. But Mexico still wants me."

"You don't need Celeste. You've Don's body and Eleana to support your story."

Eleana refused to look at her mother. "When I'm questioned I'll tell the truth."

Celeste raised her head from Hayes' shoulder. "But of course. I want you to, Eleana." She lifted her hand as if to touch her daughter's arm and changed her mind. "You love Mr. Connors very much?"

Eleana still refused to look at her. "Very much."

"I'm glad."

"Well?" Hayes demanded of Connors.

Connors attempted to dissuade him. "It's insane, Hayes. They'll find you. You'd have a few weeks, a few months at the most."

Hayes said, "A few weeks are a few weeks. I've loved Celeste for twenty-four years. I may get her away entirely. And if we stay they'll send her to the chair or lock her up for life."

"She's killed three men."

"Only one of them wasn't a heel."

"There's Blue Mound."

"To hell with Blue Mound," Hayes said. "I've carried it almost as long as I've loved Celeste. Let someone else play God. Why don't you play God and give us a forty-eight hour start?"

Connors looked at Eleana. "It's up to you, Ad," she said.

He said, "Celeste's your mother."

"She tried to kill you. I hate her."

"No, John, please," Celeste begged. "I don't care what happens to me."

Hayes said, "I care. I know now why I made and saved money. I know why I've kept most of it at the bank in cash. We can fly from St. Louis to Miami. From Miami we can fly to Bogata, or possibly Quito in Ecuador. From Quito—"

Connors turned his back on him. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"Then you'll give us forty-eight hours to disappear?"

"I'll give you forty-eight hours. But you can't get her away."

"I'll chance that. And I won't forget this, Connors."

"She's Eleana's mother," Connors said.

There was a terse, whispered, conversation behind him, Hayes urging, Celeste protesting. Then Celeste said, wearily, "All right. If you say so, John. I'll put a few things in a bag." Celeste went upstairs and returned in a few minutes carrying an overnight case.

Hayes helped her into her transparent raincape and opened the door. It still was raining, hard. Celeste started out without speaking, then turned back. "Thank you, Mr. Connors. Good bye, Eleana."

Her face buried against Connors' chest, Eleana said, "Good bye, mother."

Then the door closed and they were gone. Connors waited until the sound of Hayes' car had died away. Then he sat down and held Eleana in his lap. She wiped her eyes with his tie. "Uncle John can't get her away, can he, Ad?"

Connors settled Eleana more comfortably in his lap. "That's something I wouldn't know. At least with Hayes' money they have a chance. A much better chance than we did."

Eleana nuzzled her nose in his neck. "And look what happened to us?"

Connors lighted a cigarette and offered Eleana first puff. "And look what happened to us."

Eleana puffed the cigarette to a glow before returning it. "One cigarette, one man." She lifted her lips to be kissed.

Connors glanced at the front door. "How about Lautenbach? He's still out."

Eleana crinkled her nose. "Oh, him."

It's fun to play God, Connors thought.

Then except for the faint pat of the rain on the thick slate roof there was no sound at all and they were alone in the world and the all enveloping roar of the universe.

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